

## Advent Theme for Week Three: LOVE

Jesus' command "Love your neighbor as yourself" defines our relationships with every human person, present and future, near and far. He made that abundantly clear when he related this command to the splendid exemplar, the Good Samaritan. The question changed from "Who is my neighbor?" to "To whom can I be a neighbor?"

Poets and sages have written volumes about love, and scientists have tried to dissect it, but love remains one of life's greatest mysteries and gifts. Love comes in different forms—love of family, love of other people, love of nature, love of things and love of God.

In just five words, Jesus states his great "second command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." In some sense, the *biggest* word here is "as," because it covers everything, and the measuring stick is what we always bring with us: ourselves.

Christmas reminds us of God's gift of love in sending Baby Jesus, who was wrapped in simple swaddling clothes right after his birth, and thirty years later would die on the cruel cross for the sins of the whole world. Such love should move us to love God and his creation wholeheartedly. As we more fully experience this amazing love this Green Advent, we truly will celebrate Jesus with greater love for his creation.

In the next seven meditations we will explore multiple aspects of Love, its connection to God's love for the creation, and how we can participate in Creation-Love:

-  I John 4:1-6 = Spirit-Test: The Christmas Story
-  John 3:1-17 = Creator So Loved the World
-  Isaiah 40:12-31 = Creator: Power for the Powerless
-  Ephesians 2:1-10 = New Creation Standard
-  Romans 8:28-39 = Omnipresent Double-Love
-  Matthew 25:31-46 = Jesus in Need of Love
-  Ephesians 3:14-21 = The Holy Family Today

*Creation-Love in Word, wonder and work*

## Meditation #16: SPIRIT-TEST: The Christmas Story

### *What does it say?* –

STUDY: I John 4:1-6

GOLDEN TEXT: I John 4:2 = *This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.*

### *What does it mean?*

Love transforms. Outside the Bible, every world religion teaches that there is a great gap, or a deep divide, between God and humans. On the one hand, both Hinduism and Islam teach that the deity is *strictly* transcendent—wholly and utterly other than us. He may represent himself on earth through a human prophet or a spiritual “appearance,” but never in the flesh as a fellow human. Their gods are too special to bridge the gap, *but the living God is bigger yet, because his love even brings him into the flesh to be with us.* On the other hand, in other religions—such as Secular Humanism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and Zen—either there is no god, or else he plays no active role with humans. *Only the Bible teaches that God has become human flesh,* visiting us as a human—as predicted in the Old Testament (such as in Isaiah 7:14; 9:6) and fulfilled at the first Christmas. That is why I John 4:2 is the test of the true, loving Spirit. In spite of the way creation has been perverted, polluted and depleted, the Creator insisted upon loving and embracing the created flesh fully in order to redeem and transform it. *What an awesome God! What great love!*

1. Is there anything more natural than the supernatural? Where would creation be without the Creator? Who else could have lit the fuse for the Big Bang or orchestrated the intensely complicated creation processes?
2. Is there anything more supernatural than nature? Are the “natural phenomena” too “phenomenal” for even the best scientific methods to *completely* comprehend?
3. Why is the Christmas story—that the Word became flesh—so unique? Outside of the Bible, why does no world religion embrace full “Divine Incarnation”? Is the Christmas story the best story?
4. Does it matter that the Bible reveals a uniquely powerful picture of the Creator? Powerful enough to create the whole universe? Powerful enough to become a human infant?

### *What are we going to do about it?*

5. Is the Christmas story a model for us to fully represent the Creator in the daily care of his creation? In the care of fellow “images of God,” images of the Creator?
6. Should the miracle of Christmas impact how we see, touch and care for the creation? In what ways? Does creation-care take on higher meaning and priority since Jesus so intensely identified with his creation?
7. How is God’s act of embracing his created flesh a model for caring for the depleted and polluted creation? Should we wait until Jesus returns before we take responsibility for it? Or should we act now because he has already come?

***Truth To Celebrate:*** *Affirming the mind-blowing paradox of “the Infinite becoming the Infant” at Christmas is the ultimate test of our accountability to Truth.*

***Advent-Action:*** *Use the energy-saving settings for all of your appliances—including refrigerator, washing machine, dryer and dishwasher, and give the money you save to a church or a charity.*

## Meditation #17: Creator so Loved the WORLD

### *What does it say?*

STUDY: John 3:1-17

GOLDEN TEXT: John 3:16 = *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

### *What does it mean?*

Because this passage has been used so effectively to communicate simply and powerfully the message of God's love and salvation, Martin Luther, a leader of the Protestant Reformation, called John 3:16 "the Gospel in a nutshell." What is "hidden" in plain view is the extraordinary love God has for his world—literally, Jesus tells Nicodemus, "God so loved the *cosmos*..." We know that the prime recipients of his love are human beings—his children. Still, the saving work of God is explicitly part of his love for all his creation, his cosmos, "the world."

1. What does God's giving us his only Son—our Lord Jesus Christ—reveal about the depth of God's love? In what ways do we reveal our love for him? What is the depth of our love for the Creator's cosmos, his "world"?
2. Are men and women the loving stewards of all his creation? How is creation-care fueled by our love for our Creator and his creation?
3. Is "he gave his only..." the first model for Christmas giving? How did God show his abundant love even before Christmas? [Hint: Psalm 89 and other passages]
4. What would be different if God loved people, but not anything else in his creation? Would nature seem different to us? Do we behave sometimes as if he loves only us humans—and not the rest of the creation?

### *What are we going to do about it?*

5. Can we represent Jesus—or be God's images—without loving "the world" that he "so loved"? How is that love for the world demonstrated? How do we teach it?
6. John 3:16 says we can have eternal life by believing in God's only begotten Son, whose birthday we celebrate. Secure in him, can we then risk time and money to "improve and protect" the world that God so loves? With eternity taken care of, can we concentrate on our temporal ways of honoring and pleasing him?
7. How does our love of God's creation help empower and equip our love for people? How does love for people help intensify and direct our love of the creation, and the Creator?

***Truth To Celebrate:** The greatest Christmas gift ever—the Creator giving his only begotten Son for us—demonstrates his priceless love for all of his world, his creation.*

***Advent-Action:** Find out if your electric utility gives you an option of buying energy from renewable sources, such as wind and solar for home, Church or work. Consider signing up as you weigh the benefits of buying energy that neither depletes natural resources nor pollutes the God's world.*

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## Meditation #18: Creator: POWER for the Powerless

### *What does it say?*

STUDY: Isaiah 40:12-31

GOLDEN TEXT: Isaiah 40:28 through 31 = *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*

### *What does it mean?*

If there are power shortages, let us certainly conserve power and seek more renewable sources. Let us also turn to the ultimate source, our Creator, as the prophet Isaiah suggests. After all, the most elemental description of the Lord is that he is “*the Creator of the ends of the earth*”—the one who created everything, even in the most remote areas. The Creator himself has no energy shortage; he “*does not faint or grow weary*; and he knows what to do, because “*his understanding is unsearchable.*” Therefore, he gives power to those in need, so we can “*run and not be weary... walk and not faint.*” The prophet’s message is about the Creator’s greatness to supply both the spiritual and the physical energy that we need to fulfill our responsibilities in creation.

1. Now, even 2,000 years after the first Christmas, how many people still do not know the Creator? How do people detach from the one *Living God*, the Creator of everything?
2. Why does the prophet Isaiah especially emphasize the Creator as strong, understanding, and power-giving? What are other primary attributes of the Creator?
3. How can the youth be so exhausted—while those who rely upon the Lord can even run without being weary? Does spiritual energy help *renew* physical energy?
4. How is the Creator’s greatness demonstrated? In this text is the Creator also a model for our caring for those who are fainting and powerless?

### *What are we going to do about it?*

5. Will those who “*wait for the Lord*” more likely find new energy sources? Are we more apt to make timely adjustments to our energy consumption if we are patient and humble?
6. Now, after the first Christmas, how do we “*wait for the LORD*”? Should we sit on the couch, eat potato chips, watch TV and wait for a knock on the door? Is it better to “*wait for the Lord*” by actively reaching out to those in need—imitating the Creator’s own engaged behavior?
7. The last two lines of this text are often used in inspirational talks. Is that use really appropriate for those who are not already honoring the Creator and doing his work? Under what conditions are those two inspiring lines especially appropriate?

***Truth To Celebrate:*** *The Creator’s power and resources never run out, and he helps those in need who turn to him—with ideas, wisdom, patience and energy for the task.*

***Advent-Action:*** *Objectively, there is no energy shortage. There is only a wisdom and knowledge shortage: From a place of safety, watch a lightening storm, consider the force of river rapids or of large waves crashing on the ocean beach, feel the wind of a fierce storm. ... and study and pray that we will discover ways to harness and utilize some of that abundant energy more fully.*

## Meditation #19: New CREATION Standard

### What does it say?

STUDY: Ephesians 2:1-10

GOLDEN TEXT: Ephesians 2:8 through 10 = *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

### What does it mean?

In one of the clearest affirmations of good works, the Apostle Paul declares that we are not saved as a result of good works, but for the very purpose of doing good works. This high role of good works is made possible both (1) because of the loving, grace-filled birth and ministry of our Lord Christ Jesus, and (2) because of the loving behavior Creator-God had prepared for us all along. God is love, and he filled his creation with love.

1. Did the first Christmas happen because of human planning for good works? Not really. Still, how many good works have come as the result of the miracle of Christmas? How does this help demonstrate the truth of Ephesians 2:8-10?
2. What does the gift of God include? Is faith itself “*not of your own doing*” (v.8), but a gift of God? From where else could divine faith come? How did that faith come to you?
3. Are the divine commands for stewardship included in the “*our way of life*” (v.10) that the Savior has prepared for us? Does he still care about his creation? Does he still want us to improve and protect it (Genesis 2:15)?
4. What does “*created in Christ Jesus for good works*” mean? Is this the original creation or a new creation? Or does the Creator continue to create? Is creating a new life in Virgin Mary’s womb a special example of his continuing radical creativity?

### What are we going to do about it?

5. In your experience, do verses 8 and 9 seem to be quoted much more than verse 10? Could anyone believe that we could have real dealings with God without being affected? Could we receive God’s grace without experiencing Godly change?
6. Why is salvation “*not of your own doing*”? Could we achieve salvation if we tried hard enough, perhaps over several lifetimes, like some world religions teach? Or are we hopeless apart from Creator’s grace? How grateful to God are we? Does it show?
7. What does it mean if we say we are “saved,” but do not show gratitude to the Creator? What if we still fail to improve and protect his creation? Are you saved? To what evidence can you point?

Truth To Celebrate: *When we truly receive God’s saving grace, we will try to honor and please the Creator in everything we think, say and do.*

Advent-Action: *Have a car tuned up. A well-tuned car uses less fuel, creates less pollution, and gets people transported more dependably—and helps make the rest of the world work better, too!*

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## Meditation #20: Omnipresent Double-Love

### What does it say? –

STUDY: Romans 8:28-39

GOLDEN TEXT: Romans 8:38 and 39 = *I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

### What does it mean?

The Apostle Paul makes a verbal twist that is easily missed: his phrase *the love of God* means both God's love for us and our love for him. *The love of God* cannot be diminished or derailed by circumstances of any sort—whatever the condition of our lives or creation around us. He will always *love us* with his transforming embrace—and we should be committed to *love him* regardless of what happens to us or around us.

1. How does the Creator love us through Jesus' birth, the point of the first Christmas? How does God love us through his splendid creation? How does he love us also within daily stresses and even natural disasters?
2. How do we love God in every aspect of our lives? In every context of creation? How do we love him in the midst of resource depletion? In polluted environments? How does our love of the Creator show in our compassion for all other humans?
3. Does the Creator love us when he allows the depletion and pollution of the creation? What is he teaching us? How should we look for evidences of the Creator's love today?
4. Is this text realistic? Can we really love God in all circumstances? What gives us the focus, the power, the strength to do so? How do we express that love in his creation?

### What are we going to do about it?

5. Reexamine Romans 8:28. Does the promise “all things work together for good” help motivate our deep commitment to love God, regardless of our situation and the conditions in the creation? Is this part of being “called according to his purpose”?
6. How do we love God when environmental stresses increase? What would be an especially difficult environment in which to love God?
7. Can you think of an environmental situation in which you would find it easiest to love God? What can you do to make that circumstance more likely for yourself? For others? What did Jesus do to make your love of God easier? How does Christmas help?

Truth To Celebrate: *The “love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”—both his love for us and our love for him—is so strong that nothing can block it anywhere, and all earth is transformed by it.*

Advent-Action: *If you feel cold, add a sweater or blanket, rather than turning up the thermostat. You will also feel the warmth of satisfaction that you are benefitting the future generations among your family and friends—and among people far away. While you are saving money, make an extra donation to a mission or charity that helps other people use resources lovingly and efficiently.*

## Meditation #21: Jesus in “Need” of Love and Care

### What does it say?

STUDY: Matthew 25:31-46

GOLDEN TEXT: Matthew 25:37-40 = *Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these people, you did it to me.’*

### What does it mean?

Christmas is the definitive coming of Jesus. He also comes wherever there is need. If most scientists are right, future ecological disasters will leave more and more people without sufficient food, with severely damaged housing and other tragic suffering. Many of these disasters will occur on other continents far from the behavior that contributed partially to the ravages of these ecological imbalances. All the while, many of us may feel secure many miles from the worst disasters. However, if we listen to Jesus’ teaching here, the people enduring disasters are not faceless or nameless. It is his face we see among “the least of these.” It is his name we serve, whether or not the victims have heard of him.

1. Does this teaching stretch your imagination? In the Gospel records, what did Jesus do to identify with the suffering victims?
2. Did Jesus life, death and resurrection provide the rescue we needed from the ravages of sin? What led Jesus to serve us in our need? Did Jesus also see “his image” in us?
3. Why did Jesus assume that the opportunity of doing good works for him would make all the difference to us? Was he right?
4. Does Jesus have the right to exclude us from his kingdom just because we miss opportunities of helping those in need? Why is this a defining issue? Can we be truly grateful for Jesus’ saving help without being eager to help others in need?

### What are we going to do about it?

5. What can we do to see the presence of Jesus more clearly in the people that are in need now? What will help our moral imagination to act more effectively?
6. When we ourselves are victims—of ecological disasters, white-collar crimes, street crimes, domestic violence, or terrorism—do others see Jesus in us? How can we help them to see Jesus in us?
7. Should *proactive assistance* for potential victims count as helping Jesus? What if we dig the well before the drought? What if we help improve the levy before the flood? What if we give clothes even before people are utterly destitute and naked? What if we provide the fertilizer and agricultural know-how to help a community to avoid a famine in the first place? Would Jesus be pleased?

Truth To Celebrate: *Creation-care especially benefits the least advantaged people on every continent, and whatever benefits them also benefits Jesus, too, because it is a gift to him.*

Advent-Action: *Try to seal-up all air-leaks at home, at Church and at work with caulk and weather-stripping, to waste less heat in the winter... and at the same time you will feel warmer toward all of humanity, whose resources you are protecting.*

## Meditation #22: The Holy Family Today

### What does it say?

STUDY: Ephesians 3:14-21

GOLDEN TEXT: Ephesians 3:14 through 16 = *For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit.*

### What does it mean?

The Holy Family at Christmas was only the beginning of renewed relationships. The Apostle Paul is especially eloquent here concerning the enduring presence of the Father and our empowerment from the Holy Spirit to sustain the continuing work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The presence of God the Father and his love in us are totally beyond measure. Therefore, we have limitless, renewable resources of love to care for God's creation—including especially other people and ourselves. (See Ephesians 3:17-21.)

1. How does every family have one Father? Is this truth hard to believe? Is the human family healthy or dysfunctional? Why? What part do you play?
2. “*For this reason*” goes back to Ephesians 3:1, and is based on the end of Ephesians 2 where the Apostle Paul describes the fact that the fellowship of believers is being “*built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.*” Is this dwelling place for Sunday meetings only? Are we God's dwelling place other days of the week, too?
3. Why does the Apostle Paul want us to “*know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge*”? (Ephesians 3:19) Is that intellectual knowledge or active knowledge? Is the “love of Christ” his love for us or our love for him? Or both?
4. How can we be “*filled with all the fullness of God*”? (Ephesians 3:19) Is no aspect of God missing? Is this full “family” membership? Can this presence truly fill every part of us? Is this how he can “*accomplish in us more than we are able to ask or think*”? (Ephesians 3:20) Does our heavenly Father's inspiration include responsible creation-care?

### What are we going to do about it?

5. If we all have one Father, what is our relationship with people in the more ecologically stressed areas of the world? What should we do to show that we get the point of the Family? Can we deplete and pollute less? Can we encourage and empower more?
6. How is the Father honored when so many of his children are in danger? What if the way we pollute and deplete the creation makes other children of his suffer more? What does the Father expect us to do? Must we wait for him to tell us?
7. How does the fullness of God inside of us (Ephesians 3:19) want us to take care of his other children? And take responsibility for his creation? Could our loving care for other people and for the creation reach beyond what we can now ask or think? (Ephesians 3:20)

Truth To Celebrate: *The human family is real, through the active leadership and presence of the Father, the Creator of all, who cares that we treat one another and his creation, with love.*

Advent-Action: *Water is precious and “the world is waiting,” so take shorter showers. Get wet; suds up; rinse off. When you use less water and energy, the rest of your human family benefits.*

