

OPENER: Love Came to Stay

Luke 1:26–38; Luke 2:1–7; John 1:9–14; 1 John 4:9–11

Brothers and sisters, Friends, today we begin the journey of Advent again.

We've just watched a family light the first candle on our wreath—the Candle of Love. A small flame in a big room. It doesn't feel like much, but you can't deny it's there. It quietly pushes back the darkness.

Advent begins with that kind of love: not loud, not flashy, but stubbornly present. A love that shows up and stays.

Introduction: “I love coffee...I love my kids...I love God”

We use the word love for just about everything, don't we?

“I love coffee.”

“I love my dog.”

“I love that TV show.”

And in the next breath, “I love my kids. I love my church. I love God.”

Same word. Very different things. So, when we say, “God is love” (1 John), what do we actually mean? Is it just a warm feeling somewhere in God's heart? A vague spiritual vibe?

Advent refuses to let love stay blurry or sentimental. Advent says:

“This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world...” (1 John 4:9, NIV).

Love does something. Love comes. Love takes on skin and bone, a birthdate, and a hometown. Advent love is love you can point to.

Today, as we begin with the Candle of Love, I want us to walk back into the story and watch what God's love does as it chooses, comes close, stays with us, and moves through us.

Take Away 1 – Love That Chooses

The story doesn't begin in Bethlehem; it starts in Nazareth, with a young woman named Mary and a man named Joseph. God doesn't pull two perfect saints out of a display case. He chooses a real couple in a real family system.

And then the question comes.

- To Mary: “You will conceive and give birth to a son... he will be called the Son of the Most High.”
- To Joseph: in a dream, “Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife...”

This is love that chooses. It is personal, concrete, and costly.

It's also a moment of potential chaos. A pregnancy before the wedding. Questions from relatives. Gossip in a tight-knit village. The family is under stress.

Joseph has options. He can react in anger. He can protect his own reputation and quietly step away. Or he can make a different kind of move—one that isn't controlled by fear or shame.

Matthew tells us Joseph chooses obedience. He takes Mary as his wife. He becomes a calm, steady presence, covering her with his name and his protection, even though people will whisper.

That's what love looks like in a family system: not pretending everything's fine, not explaining everything away, but choosing faithfulness over fear, obedience over image.

Friends, some of us know what it is to grow up in complicated families. Some of us are in them right now. Advent begins by telling you:

- God is not afraid of your family.
- God is not scared off by your mess.
- God is willing to step right into your story.

Love chooses a family—with all its history and anxiety—and says, “This is where I will be born.”

Take Away 2 – Love That Comes Close

Fast forward with me from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The emperor issues a decree, and suddenly the whole world is on the move.

Mary and Joseph travel south, uphill, to Bethlehem—the “House of Bread.” The streets are crowded. Relatives' homes are full. The guest spaces are taken. So where does love show up?

Many scholars suggest Jesus may have been born not in a cute wooden stable, but in a cave used for animals, with a stone feeding trough carved into the rock. It's rough, crowded, and noisy.

Right there—into that space—Mary's labor pains begin. With limited privacy and no sanitized delivery room, the Word becomes flesh.

Apostle John says it simply: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14).

God “tabernacles” among us; God pitches His tent in our neighborhood. The glory that once filled a tent and a temple now is wrapped in newborn skin, held in Mary's arms, and laid in a manger.

Love comes close in utter vulnerability. Love enters our world, not armored, but breakable.

So, picture that cave for a moment: the low ceiling, the flicker of oil lamps, the sound of animals shifting. Mary cries out in labor. Joseph does the best he can. And then, a baby's first cry cuts through the air.

In that moment, in that cave, in that body: Love has a face. Love has lungs. Love has a heartbeat.

If God's love is willing to come that close, in that kind of place, then it might be closer to your life than you think—right in the middle of your own noisy, crowded, imperfect cave.

Take Away 3 – Love That Stays and Teaches

The baby in the manger does not stay a baby. John says the true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.

In Friends language, the same Christ who lay in the manger is the One who, by the Spirit, teaches His people inwardly: Christ the Inner Teacher, present among His gathered people.

Early Friends were gripped by this: Christ has come to teach his people himself—not only through ink on a page, but as a living Presence in the midst of the meeting. Holiness is union with God that is both intimate and missional: drawn into God's love and then sent out for the sake of the world.

Thomas Kelly speaks of life lived from a Divine Center—a quiet place in the depths of the soul where Christ dwells, gathering our scattered energies, simplifying our fevered schedules, anchoring us in “unhurried peace and power.” That's what it means for love to stay. Not just to make a guest appearance at Christmas, but to take up residence in us, as individuals and as a community.

When God becomes human, He embraces risk and exposure—the possibility of rejection, suffering, and death—all for the sake of relationship. Jesus is rooted in the Father's love, clear about His mission, unshaken by the crowd's anxiety, yet deeply moved with compassion.

And here's the Advent good news: that same Christ is present with us now—by the Spirit—teaching, centering, and forming His people into a community that resembles His love.

Take Away 4 – Love That Moves Through Us

(Three Advent Practices)

If that's what love is—God choosing, coming close, and staying to teach and center us—then what does it look like when that love starts moving through us this Advent?

John says, “Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.” (1 John 4:11).

Advent love is never just, “God loves me; isn't that nice?” Advent love is, “God loves us, and that love is pushing out through us.”

So here are three simple practices for this week.

1. Love makes room.

There was no guest room available for Mary and Joseph, so God made room in a cave. What would it look like to “make room” this Advent—at your table, in your schedule, in your attention? Is there someone you could invite in, or some space you could clear, so that love can be practiced and not just talked about?

2. Love listens.

If Christ is our Inner Teacher, one of the most loving things we can do is listen—to Him and to one another. Around your wreath or at the dinner table, light the Candle of Love

again, read a few verses from Luke 2, sit in silence for a minute, then let each person answer one question: “Where did you see love today?” Over time, this kind of listening trains us to notice Love’s quiet work all around us—and to join in.

3. Love lowers anxiety.

The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas can be some of the most anxious of the year. Bowen reminds us that anxiety is contagious in a family system—but so is calm. Jesus shows us what it is to be a calm, grounded presence in the storm. So here’s a simple Advent commitment:

“With God’s help, I will seek to be a calm, loving presence in my circles this week.”

You don’t have to have all the answers or win every argument. Most of the time, your faithful presence—steady, kind, grounded in Christ—is the most loving gift you can offer.

Returning to the Candle

Let’s come back to that little flame we lit at the beginning of worship.

It’s still here. Still burning. Still pushing back darkness, a few inches around itself.

In a world that tosses the word love so easily (for coffee and clothes and movies and sports teams), Advent points us to a very specific love:

- Love that chooses a real family, with all its mess.
- Love that comes close in a cave and a manger.
- Love that stays and teaches, centering us in a Divine Love we can trust.
- Love that moves through us as we make room, listen deeply, and carry a calm presence into anxious spaces.

Friends, the good news of this Advent week is simply this:

Love has a name.

Love has a face.

Love has come and Love is here.

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” He has not left. He is present by His Spirit, even now, even here, even in you.

May this Advent be a season where we don’t just talk about love but receive it, live from it, and share it.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Word made flesh, Love with skin on,
we thank You that You did not love us from a distance.

You chose a real family, You entered a real world,
and You stayed to teach and heal and save.

As we begin this Advent journey,
kindle Your love in us.
Make our homes places where love makes room,
where hearts listen,
and where anxiety is met with Your calm presence.
Center us again in Your Divine Love.
Live Your life in us.
And let Your love move through us
to our neighbors, our coworkers, and our city.
In Your holy name we pray. Amen.