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A Love Story

Luke 2:1-14 Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. "For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. "And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward all!

Professor Karl Barth was one of the greatest Protestant theologians of the 20th century. Even if you do not know the name, if you have listened to sermons preached between 1930 and now, you have been exposed to Barth's influence. He was a formidable figure. He stood up to the Nazis when Hitler tried to make the church in Germany the servant of odious ideology and murderous machinations. He wrote literally hundreds and hundreds of thousands of words. Near the end of his life, he gave a lecture at a university and after he was done, the president of that university, sensing how very tired Professor Barth was, said to the audience that instead of taking questions from them for Professor Barth, he himself would simply ask Professor Barth one question. The question that the president asked him was this: *"What is the greatest, the most important, the most profound theological insight that you have had?"* As you might imagine, the audience grew silent, pens ready to record the words of this venerable and great man. Slowly Professor Barth replied: *"The greatest insight I have*

*had is this: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'*¹ And then the president asked a follow-up question, playing the devil's advocate: *"But how do you know that this is so?"* And Professor Barth replied: *"Because my mother told me and she would not lie to me."*

I have known very, very few people who have come to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ simply through reading the Bible. The Bible, rightly read, indeed testifies to the love of Jesus, the love of God, but that testimony is only fully fleshed out, fully experienced, fully formed through our *relationships* to others who themselves have a relationship to God through Jesus Christ. If Professor Barth's mother had simply handed him a Bible at some point and told him to read it, I daresay he might have found it to simply be one more example of religious literature among the thousands of religious books, written from a thousand points of view, an intellectual curiosity. But that is not what she did. She **loved** him. She **showed** him through her life what was in that book. She **showed** him what *her* life was like because *she* had **experienced** the love of Jesus. She sang to him and held him and comforted him and taught him and urged him on and made it clear to him that in doing so she was expressing in human form the love of Jesus that does not, will not, cannot ever let her or any of us go.

The writer of the letter of First John in the New Testament says this: *"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us"* (1 John 4:11-12). My friends, the Christmas story, that beautiful and oh-so-familiar story

¹From Bill Adams' sermon "The Original Love Story," www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/b-ch00-adams.php
I am indebted to this sermon for some of the ideas and tropes in this sermon.

which Laura read, in fact, best understood as a love story! The poet Christina Rossetti put it this way in a poem that has been put to music by the contemporary Christian group Jars of Clay: *“Love came down at Christmas; Love, a lovely love divine; Love was born at Christmas; Stars and angels gave the sign... Love be yours, and love be mine; Love from God to all of us.”* Now, the best love stories seem like miracles, don’t they? Think of Romeo and Juliet, or Tony and Maria in “West Side Story.” Or a Republican and a Democrat. Or even a Coloradoan and a Texan. Love seems a miracle indeed -- the overcoming of differences, the finding of possibilities where it would seem that such possibilities shouldn’t have been possible at all! And, after all, which one of us here has not had the thought: *“What if my parents had never met? Would there be a me? How different would I be?”* But those what-if’s only reinforce, don’t they, what a miracle of grace it is that the love story that created you did in fact come to pass!

My friends, on this Christmas morning, the love story that is Jesus’ birth is the *very same sort of story*. The love story that came to life in the lives of Mary and Joseph, and which wended its way down through the ages to Professor Barth’s mother and finally to those who gave *you* life and those who continue to give you life is that very same sort of story. For on this holy day I invite you to ask yourself: who would **YOU not** be if people in your life had not shown you the love of God through Jesus? Who are the living miracles of grace that made you and continue to make you who you are? And then play that what-if game for just a moment: what if those folks had *not* been part of your lives? How different would you be? Would you know just how much God loves you? Would you?

God's Christmas gift to us in the form of our Lord Jesus Christ is, then, also an opportunity and a challenge *to* us to **re-gift** that gift, as it were. It is the occasion to turn to turn to those who have indeed been the face and hands of Jesus to you and say *"thank you for helping make me who I am, thank you for showing me the love of God."* And it is the joyful, wondrous, miraculous, amazing opportunity on **our** parts to continue that long-ago love story through **our** reaching out in love to those who need that miracle. So my friends, as the presents are opened, and tables are gathered round, and family and friends are reunited, resolve on this and every day that **you** too will be a cast-member in that love story that we have been shown this day, as **you** too reach out and change lives, as **you** too become one of those people about whom someone else will say *"If he hadn't been there for me, if she hadn't been there for me, my life would be so much poorer."* For, after all, John is so very right: *"if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is made complete in us."* Amen and Merry Christmas!