



Our Advent series *beloved* is about focusing on the greatest love story ever told, the love of God for us, His creation. God loved us so much that He sent His Son to suffer and die on our behalf. Christmas is a celebration of the beginning of that story. The book Song of Songs captures the deep passion of those yoked in marriage, but it's also a metaphor for Jesus Christ and His bride, the church. Song of Songs 2:16 says, "My beloved is mine and I am his." That is how Jesus feels about us. God is coming over the hills to reach you, to save you, to bring you home...and to call you His *beloved*.

I WILL NOT BE STOPPED • Hebrews 12:1-3 • Tim McConnell • Dec. 11, 2016

If at first you don't succeed...stop immediately and do something easier! If at first you don't succeed... assume God has other plans for you! No. We all know nothing of significance in this world is accomplished without some persistence. Orville and Wilbur had a pile of failed models and a few solid crashes before December 17, 1903, when they launched a flight of 120 feet and 12 seconds at Kitty Hawk. Edison failed so many times at the light bulb, he was asked by a reporter, "How did it feel to fail 999 times?" to which he famously replied, "I never failed. I figured out 1,000 ways how not to make a light bulb." It was a successful invention with 1,000 steps. Persistence. Those who have made the greatest contributions, those who have shaped culture and history, those who have truly added something are all marked by persistence. And what can motivate someone to that kind of stick-to-it-ive-ness? I would submit that if you asked those who have made the greatest change how they stayed true to their goal, how they stared down opposition and walked past the envious or ill-wishing, how they woke up each morning with energy to take one more step toward their goal, if you ask them what's in their heart...well, there is just no motivation like love. When once we capture a vision of love before us, love for humanity, love for God, love for a cure or an advance or a possibility, once love captures us, there is no limit to what we will endure.

The Beloved comes to name us His beloved. The Beloved comes with persistence, with tenacity. This is not some bloodless sacrifice, some cold errand, some emotionless, passionless duty—Jesus is motivated by one thing: Love. And that motivation is enough to endure anything to get to us. Hebrews 12 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus. He is the pioneer and perfecter of faith. "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (Hebrews 12:2-3) Do we falter when we face opposition? Look to Jesus, and see what opposition he endured. Do we falter when we struggle to fulfill our calling before God? Look to Jesus who endured the cross. The Beloved will not be stopped.

Jesus will endure anything to get to you. Don't believe me? Hear again from Isaiah this morning: "Pass through, pass through the gates! Prepare the way for the people. Build up, build up the highway! Remove the stones. Raise a banner for the nations. The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: 'Say

to Daughter Zion, 'See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.' They will be called the Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord; and you will be called Sought After, the City No Longer Deserted." (Isaiah 62:10-12) Take that straight to heart. Isn't that what John the Baptist was saying last week? Prepare the way of the Lord. Straighten the road, remove the barriers. Not so we can get to Jesus, but so Jesus can get to us. Jesus is coming. And your name will be changed. See, your Savior comes! And you will be called "Sought After." Sought after by whom? Hear me now: you are the object of God's redeeming love. You are the one sought after by the Lord.

It's like we saw in our guiding passage for this series from the Song of Songs. Pastor Jennifer and Pastor John both preached powerfully about it after Thanksgiving: "Listen! My beloved! Look! Here he comes, leaping across the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice." (Song of Songs 2:8-9) That's how Jesus loves. That's the pursuing love of God. Mountains are only there to be leapt across. Hills are there to be bounded over! That's a lot of leaping and bounding. I feel like I'm at the Nutcracker. Walls are nothing. Windows, easy to smash through. Lattice, forget about it. The Beloved is coming, and He will not be stopped. Nothing can frustrate His mission of love. There is no opposition strong enough to halt His progress. Jesus is coming. And that's good news.

Jesus would not have to come if we could get to Him. But we can't. In his new book, *Hidden Christmas*, Pastor Tim Keller points out that in his community in New York City he has noticed that Christmas is often an occasion for a different message. Christmas the cultural holiday, the secular celebration, is about the milk of human kindness, hope for an overcoming unity, peace, and love somehow bubbling up from within us despite all evidence to the contrary. Keller noticed an ad in the *New York Times* saying, "The meaning of Christmas is that love will triumph and that we will be able to put together a world of unity and peace." Sounds nice, but let me tell you, if that were true, Christmas would be a dark holiday indeed. Because if it is up to us, we're sunk. Actually the message of Christmas is the exact opposite. The message of Christmas is that we cannot save ourselves. In fact, the confidence that we can save ourselves, or soon will save humanity from itself, with the next scientific

breakthrough, or the next educational endeavor, or the next political ideology—these confidences have only led to deeper darkness. But that’s actually the message of Christmas. It’s dark out there, but there is hope. As Tim Keller puts it, “The Light of the world descended into darkness in order to bring us into God’s beautiful light (1 Peter 2:9). The promises of Christmas cannot be discerned unless you first admit you can’t save yourself or even know yourself without the light of his unmerited grace in your life. This is the foundational truth from which we can proceed to learn the hidden meanings of Christmas.” (Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, p. 19) We cannot manifest the magic of Christmas. We cannot save ourselves. We need a Savior. Behold your Savior comes!

If we could get home to Him, He would not need to come to us. But we can’t. The good news is that the Beloved is coming to us, and He will not be stopped. Jesus is motivated by love, and that love produces great persistence. What can we say about the love of God met in Jesus? What can we say about the persistence of God we see in Jesus? Have you ever thumbed through the Gospels just to reflect on the tenacity of Jesus? This Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. No shame, no entanglements, no opposition was up to the task of changing His course. Pressed upon by Satan himself, Jesus resists by the Word and Spirit of God. Faced with unbelieving disciples, Jesus presses on displaying divine power and calling them to follow. We must cross the sea, he says; when opposed by waves and wind, a word puts them in their place. We must cross through Samaria, although this people hates us; Jesus makes it an opportunity to seek and save the lost. Opposed by religious leaders and crowds who want Him dead, Jesus presses on toward Jerusalem escaping their grasp. Faced with death itself, of His dear friend Lazarus, Jesus stands before the tomb and demands the stone be removed. When the people warn of the odor, Jesus walks forward anyway. There is no stopping this man. Not even the gaping tomb ridden with death deters Him from His purpose. Luke says he “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Luke 9:51) knowing His time to leave this earth was near. When they came to tell Him to turn away, “Herod wants to kill you” (Luke 13:31) He didn’t turn away. Opposed by false charges, betraying disciples, evil powers, bloodthirsty Roman rulers, the whips of guards, the shame of public suffering, the nails, the wood. Jesus never turned away from His goal. He never blinked an eye.

Isaiah prophesied about the coming Messiah, putting these words in His mouth: “I gave my back to those

who strike, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I hid not my face from disgrace and spitting. But the Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame.” (Isaiah 50:7) Yes, that’s a picture of Jesus. He set His face like a flint. Once Jesus had His saving purpose in mind, once he could see the redemption won by His suffering, His resolve never wavered. Not for a minute. C. H. Spurgeon preached, “The fact is that our Master, even from eternity, resolved to save His people, and nothing could keep Him from the accomplishment of His purpose. From eternity He foresaw that they would fall from their first estate and He entered into Covenant engagements to redeem them—and from the pledge He gave of old, He never turned back.” That’s the kind of resolve we see in Jesus. That’s the tenacity, the perseverance. That’s the kind of relentless passion we see coming toward us to save us. Nothing can stop His redeeming love.

A poet named Francis Thompson wrote about Jesus’ pursuit of him back in the 1880’s in a poem called “The Hound of Heaven.” “Still with unhurrying chase; And unperturbèd pace; Deliberate speed, majestic instancy; Came on the following Feet; And a Voice above their beat—‘Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.’” There’s no escaping Jesus! C. S. Lewis described his conversion in the same way, when he was an atheist professor in Oxford and could not get Jesus out of his head: “You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.” Once you are in the sights of the love of Christ, you can run but you can’t hide!

So, back to Hebrews. These few little verses: “And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1-2). Jesus endured so much. Jesus walked through fire. Even though He was warned again and again, even though His own disciples turned back and scattered, even up to the cross, alone, penniless, powerless, under a crown of shame—it was nothing to Him. Nothing. Why? “For the joy that was set before him.” For the joy set

before Him. Do you know what that joy was? It was you. It is you.

Maybe you have a nice picture of your family you are sending out in Christmas cards this week. Maybe you keep a picture of your family in your wallet. Jesus had that too. When you receive His love, when the stones are removed, and the road made clear, and your Savior comes with rewards in His right hand, and you receive His redeeming love, you are restored and adopted. You are made a daughter of God. You are made a son of God. You enter Jesus' family. See, Jesus saw all that. For the joy that was set before Him, He endured the cross. The joy set before Him was a family picture, a picture of home with God, the eternal family of God—with you right next to Him. And he loves that picture so much. Nothing will stop Him. He loves that picture so much, it's nothing. It's nothing to rise from His throne, to leave His place in heaven with the Father, to march down past the ranks of the heavenly host, to descend to earth with blessing and recompense in His hand, to take on flesh in the womb of Mary, to be born a helpless infant destined to hang on a cross of wood. It's nothing. He's got a picture of you in His back pocket. That's all He needs. For the joy set before Him. He endured.

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STUDY GUIDE

"I Will Not Be Stopped"

Isaiah 62:6-12; Hebrews 12:1-3

Start It

- I love the stories I hear from long-married couples. Sometimes I will ask a couple at fifty years of marriage what they have learned. I have not heard a single couple say it was easy all the way along. But it is rewarding, and the love runs deep. I also like to hear stories of how couples met. Some fall in love at the same time, but it seems for most there is a pursuit. "Eventually, he just wore me down!" Think about a favorite story you know of a long-married couple and how they met.

Study It

- Read Isaiah 62:6-12. Do you see Christmas in this passage? When the Savior comes, what four names are given to the people of God? What do you think they mean?
- The Savior in Isaiah 62:11 is coming with "reward" and "recompense." "Recompense" can mean payment to make up for a wrong suffered, or compensation for suffering. Who needs to be compensated for wrongs? The people of God, God Himself, or both? What is Jesus bringing?
- Read Matthew 3:7-10. Are you surprised by John's tone? What does John mean when he says "the ax is already at the root of the trees" (verse 10)? What could the religious leaders do to prepare for the coming of Christ?
- Read Hebrews 12:1-3. Do you see Christmas in this passage? I've heard it said, sometimes credited to Martin Luther, "the shadow of the cross was cast over the manger." It is foolish to divorce the incarnation from the crucifixion and resurrection. They are one errand of salvation, one mission. What gave Jesus the strength to endure through the entire mission from birth to death to rising again?
- John wants the people to be prepared for the arrival of Jesus. What in his message makes you feel unprepared? What could you do to ready your heart for Jesus?

Pray It

Lord, Jesus Christ, You measured the heavens and seas, You cast the stars in the heavens putting each on in its place, in You all things hold together. In Your mercy and by Your love, You descended to the helpless state of an unborn child in a virgin's womb. Born into this world was eternity itself contained in an infant's span. For the joy set before You, the ministry of suffering and death on a cross You endured, and the salvation of the world was made. All glory to You, Lord Jesus Christ! In Your name, Amen.

Live It

Share or journal what inspires you to endure hardship and persevere toward a goal.