

Dear Beloved One,

This is a love letter, And here is a love poem:

Roses are red, violets are blue

The meaning of Christmas is, “I love you.”

Did I make you laugh? Or did I make you groan? Either way, Good! Now that I have your attention, I want you to know that I’m dead serious. This is a love letter – from me to you – written in answer to your question about Christmas.

I don’t think I need to remind you that Christmas is my birthday. The earnest among you have been celebrating for a month with nativity sets on your front lawns and posts about how “Jesus is the reason for the season” on social media. I thank you for that.

But if I were decorating for Christmas, here’s what I’d do. I’d rummage through the Valentine’s Day bin. I’d string red hearts up everywhere. I’d rip-off that “I heart New York” logo and change it to “I heart you.” I’d decorate my Christmas tree with heart-shaped ornaments and nothing else. You’d all get a Valentine’s card from me. It’d be homemade, nothing mushy, just the simple truth. I’d put your name in cursive and my name in block letters. Why? Because it’s you, my love – you, my loves – who are the reason for the season. Christmas is me loving you.

If you’re a churchgoer, you’ve probably come to expect a yearly sermon from your pastor about putting me first at Christmastime. You’ll hear that I’m the real star of Christmas. In opening this letter, I’m guessing you expected more of the same. With all due respect to pastors everywhere, I’m writing to tell you that they’ve gotten things switched around a bit. Christmas is less about you loving me than it is about me loving you. I hear you sing, “O come, let us adore him,” And you sing it with such joy on Christmas Eve, but I also sing on Christmas Eve. I bend low, I sing you to sleep, and on Christmas morning, I am there to brush the hair from your face, and sing you awake:

I came, for I adore you
I came, for I adore you
I came, for I adore you,
My own precious child.

Chances are you've never heard a Sunday sermon admonishing you to put yourself first at Christmastime, but that is exactly what I did. I put you first. If I were invited to preach from your pulpit, that would be my message entirely. It'd be a one-point sermon, a one-word sermon – you. You are what Christmas means to me. I was born for you. I am God's gift to you. I dropped from Mary's womb into your life for your joy, your healing, your consolation, and your hope unending.

Even people who don't go to church generally know the salient details of my birth – shepherds, angels, wise men, the manger, swaddling clothes. But there is one divine detail that doesn't get nearly enough attention: before I was born, I loved you.

Haven't you noticed my devotion to you all this time? Never mind if you haven't; I'll spell it out for you. My love for you doesn't depend on you noticing. It doesn't depend on you doing anything. Loving you was my choice to make. I have chosen and will keep on choosing you, you, and you, again. My choice holds until the end of time, and if that is how long it takes for you to believe what I am trying to tell you, then so be it. This is a love letter. Christmas is a love story. I was born to love you, and I have done so with every molecule of my being.

If you find this hard to believe, I don't blame you. I know what it is to be you, or rather, to be one of you. I know the deep spiritual damage self-loathing can wreak. I understand your love-hate relationship with love itself. I know how complicated love gets, both the giving and the receiving of it, and I understand how hard it must be to think straight about such important matters when the holiday pressures mount.

I watch you and everyone else go through the paces of Christmas each year with consternation. Much of what you do gladdens my heart, but I'm dismayed to see that the sort of people I

prioritized in my ministry have the worst time of it. Year after year after year, those who live from paycheck to paycheck go deeper into debt, the bereaved sink farther into grief, and those who already despise themselves find even more reasons to do so amid the twinkling lights of holiday cheer.

I keep an especially close eye on the children. They are buried under a mountain of advertisements and burdened with a Santa narrative that fuels their material wants. Everyone says Christmas is for children, but I won't believe that until concern for the wellbeing of children extends beyond this annual impulse to buy them things. I'll believe Christmas is for children when you can show me a Macy's trained Jesus in every shopping mall with long lines of little ones eagerly waiting their turn to climb on my lap, hear me call them by name, and tell them that even before they were born I already loved them with an everlasting love.

I find the whole "magic of Christmas" shtick especially tiresome; I urge you to drop it. My love for you is a sacred thing, and my Incarnation is one of earth's holiest moments. There's plenty of magic to be found elsewhere. Leave it to the fairy tales, Disney movies, Harry Potter books, and your own imaginations.

Build all the pretend worlds you want, worlds where dreams come true and good people get their just rewards, but please leave Christmas out of it. There is no such thing as Christmas magic. None. Zero.

When it comes to Christmas, it's not about magic; it's about truth and wonder and mystery. There's nothing make-believe about divine love. Don't chase fool's gold when the God of yesterday, today, and forever waits at your doorstep.

Here's what I want for Christmas: I want a Christmas overhaul. I want my birthday to celebrate my love for all God's children. I want the holiday with my name on it to bless poor and rich alike. I want it to heal the brokenhearted, mend relationships, change lives, and change the world. I don't want Christmas to be *on* your agenda for a few exhausting weeks, then get

crossed off, packed into boxes, and stored in your attic until next year. I want Christmas to *be* your agenda. I want Christmas to *set* your agenda for the entire year. Did you hold a toy drive? Excellent; now hold a love drive. Don't know how that would work? Figure it out, my loves. I believe in you.

What I want for Christmas, more than anything, is for you to believe. Let me be more specific. What I want is for you to believe me. Maybe you're a skeptic. Maybe you consider yourself spiritual-but-not-religious. Maybe you have a million and one questions about the historical reality of me that inclines you to throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. I'm not asking you to be someone you are not. Nor am I asking you to believe every single narrative detail about me if you find you cannot. I am asking that you believe the essence of me. I'm inviting you – I am encouraging you – to make a joyful choice to believe the whole truth about me: I am love, pure, holy, infinite, unchanging, merciful, gracious, slow to anger, powerful beyond measure, made perfect in weakness. All of who I am is aimed squarely at all of who you are, all the time.

I already told you that this is a love letter and that love letters have love poems, so here is another:

Violets are blue, roses are red.

There's only one thing I haven't yet said:

My body was broken, for your sake, I bled

I died with the weight of the world on my head.

My incarnation was all for love's sake, so when you hear the word "Christmas" think "love," and when you say, "Merry Christmas!" think, "Merry Love!" When you exchange Christmas gifts, call them love gifts. Sing love carols. Send love cards. Bake love cookies and roast a love ham. Hang love ornaments on a love tree strung with tiny colored love lights.

You know what? Find 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 in your Bible right now (pause). Let's change it up a bit. Say it with me. "Christmas is patient; Christmas is kind; Christmas is not envious or

boastful or arrogant or rude. Christmas does not insist on its own way. Christmas is not irritable or resentful; Christmas keeps no record of wrongs; Christmas does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Christmas bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Christmas never ends.”

What does Christmas mean to me? It means...I love you, you knucklehead! It means anytime you want to stop chasing the golden ring, the carrot on the stick, the next shiny object that catches your fancy, I, the source and author of you, will be here waiting. Anytime you're ready, I am. I'm not stalking you; I'm no hound of heaven. I'm more like a tree shading you year in and year out whether or not you've noticed.

Christmas is me coming to you with my hand outstretched. Take my hand. That's all I want for Christmas. I cannot be Emmanuel alone. I cannot be who I am apart from you and countless others because my very name means "God-with-us". I wasn't born for my sake. I was born for yours.

Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. Lean on me. Walk with me. I'll bring you to a patch of holy ground, or to a Communion table, or to a mighty river. I'll bring you to a place where even a broken spirit might hear an angel chorus thrum with sacred joy too deep, too broad, too stirring for words alone.

Spend Christmas with me, my love. We'll shape it together, and I will help you love the Christmas you have, not the Christmas you wish you had.

Come with me, as I said before:

Roses are red, violets are blue.

The meaning of Christmas is "I love you"

Every last one of you.

Forever yours,

Jesus