

**Sunday, December 24, 2023**  
**Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 1:39-55**  
**"Love has Come"**

**The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching**

Several years ago, while serving in another church, it came time to start preparing for the annual Christmas Pageant and I was in charge. Don't we miss those Sally? Anyway, a young woman came in to see me and said, "So, I've been thinking that my son Jeremy could be the star of the Christmas pageant!" Knowing that her son was about fifteen months old and quite active, I asked quite confused, "the *star* of the pageant is the baby Jesus, do you want your son to sit in our little wooden manger during the entire pageant?" "Oh no," she laughed, "I mean the star of Bethlehem! You see, I ordered this beautiful gold costume which has a huge star on the front of it, and I was thinking we could somehow suspend him from the ceiling of the church, so that he could actually hang over the manger!" You can't make this stuff up! Well, I tried very hard to hide my tremendous surprise and tried even harder not to burst out laughing and simply said, "oh, I don't think so." Well, she went off in quite a huff! Who wouldn't want their little precious child to be the star of the pageant?!

But the real tension each year was who would play the part of Mary – you see, every young girl wanted to be Mary, she had the best solo. That was the same year, my favorite twin sisters both tried out for the part of Mary – how do you decide that one?! Well, that was the year we came up with a new speaking and singing part for the Angel Gabriel. One was Mary, one was Gabriel. Whew, dogged a bullet there!

Well, we made it to the last Sunday before Christmas. The Sunday of Love. Can you believe it's tomorrow and tonight is Christmas Eve?! The temptation to rush to that joyful moment in which Christ is born, is almost more than we can bare. But, what if we didn't? What if we stopped one more time, to enjoy the feeling of expectation? Advent. What if we sit for just a moment longer and nurture that dream of hope, peace, joy and love, a little bit longer. Perhaps it is in the act of remembering that the meaning of Advent becomes clearer, hearing the story again and again. Looking for signs of God's love, God's presence, again.

And so on this the last Sunday in Advent, let's spend a moment talking about Mary. As one minister writes, "Mary is our model, our example, our witness, our sister, who voices for us a pattern of Christmas expectancy and Christmas response. She embodies our Christmas feelings, our Christmas questions, our Christmas ponderings, not only in response to the time leading up to Christmas but also in our post-Christmas reality." (1) But first let's start with the passage from Zephaniah.

The prophet Zephaniah is not a prophet we hear from often. And most of his prophecy was well, not good news, condemnation and judgement, but like all of the passages we have heard this advent from Prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, this passage shows us one thing, God's amazing continuous love for Israel and its people.

And so the prophet describes for the people of Israel, what has been called the Day of the Lord, to give them a word of hope, the courage to change their ways because God **will** be victorious over the enemies, Gods saving love **will** rescue them. So don't be afraid, the prophet states, the words here mean literally, don't let your hands drop to your sides in complete

defeat, for God is near, God's love will protect you and care for you. Beautiful words of courage and comfort.

Now, when you step back and look at the Gospel of Luke, you discover Luke really likes songs. Zechariah sings when his son John is born and his tongue is finally loosened. Today we hear Mary's song, when she is greeted by her cousin Elizabeth. [And we hear a little song in Elizabeth's greeting as well.] The angels sing of peace and goodwill when they share their "good news of great joy" with the shepherds. As one pastor writes, "why all these songs? [Why?] Because singing is an act of resistance. That's not to say that all singing is, of course. Sometimes it's an act of joy and sometimes of [fellowship], but it's also an act of resistance.

The African American slaves knew this. When they sang their spirituals, they were both praising God and protesting the masters who locked them out of worship but couldn't keep them out of the promise of deliverance of the Bible. And the civil rights leaders knew this, too, singing songs like "We Shall Overcome," when so many in the society didn't give them a chance to advance their cause of justice, let alone triumph.

The protesters in Leipzig in 1989 knew this as well. While that element sometimes gets overlooked in the histories of the "velvet revolution," it's striking to note that for several months preceding the fall of the Berlin wall, the citizens of Leipzig gathered on Monday evenings by candlelight around St. Nikolai church – the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas – to sing, and over two months their numbers grew from a little more than a thousand people to more than three hundred thousand, over half the citizens of the city, singing songs of hope and protest and justice, until their song shook the powers of their nation and changed the world. (Later, when someone asked one of the officers of the *Stasi*, the East German secret police, why they did not crush this protest like they had so many others, the officer replied, "We had no contingency plan for song.")

I think Mary and Elizabeth knew this as well. I think, that is, that they knew just how radical and ridiculous their situation was – two women, one [way] too old to bear a child, one so young she was not yet married, yet called to bear children of promise through whom God would change the world.

And do you realize how controversial Mary's song, known as the Magnificat, "my soul magnifies the Lord", do you realize how radical it was? First of all, Mary was Jewish and living under Roman occupation so she had no rights and privileges because the Jewish weren't even considered citizens, and she was a woman in a patriarchal culture where men had all the power, and she was a teenager who was pregnant, and if the community suspected she was no longer a virgin before marriage, she would be unmarriageable and bring shame on herself and her entire family.

And yet, as our author Kara Edison states, and yet "this is how God chose to enter the world, and the unlikely nature of this choice is exemplified in the subversive nature of Mary's song". "All generations will call me blessed"! (2) God will assure the proud and powerful will be overturned and the rich will be sent away, a proclamation bordering on treason. The lowly will be elevated, the hungry filled with good things, a complete overhaul of the values upheld back them. Profound, absurd. What confidence, what spiritual courage!

And Elizabeth, proclaiming with full confidence – "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Mary and Elizabeth probably knew how little account the world would pay them, tucked away in the hill country of Judea, far

from the courts of power and influence. They knew hard life and oppression. Yet when faced with the long odds of their situation, they did not retreat, or apologize, or despair, they *sang*. They sang of their confidence in the Lord's promise to upend the powers that be, reverse the fortunes of an unjust world, and lift up all those who had been oppressed. When you're back is up against the wall, you see, and all looks grim, one of the most unexpected and powerful things you can do is sing.

Gracia Grindal, one of the church's most prolific contemporary hymn writers, started one of her Advent hymns with a line that captures this sentiment well: "We light the Advent candles *against* the winter light," she penned. Not "because of," or "during," but "against," reminding us that the light of Advent, like the light of Christ, is a [real] protest to and resistance of the darkness that gathers all around us. (3)

During Advent we hear how the Word became flesh and lived among us. But let's not sanitize the messy reality of what this means. Artwork of the baby Jesus unfortunately gives us a radiant little cherub lit up as though from within. Martin Luther, in a famous (and otherwise very good) Christmas Eve sermon, makes the dubious claim that Mary experienced no pain in delivering him. I don't believe that for a minute. The Son of God was born as every one of us is: a mother's *labor* brought him into the world, wailing and messy. Those famous swaddling clothes? He soiled them and they had to be changed. He felt cold and hunger, and he cried. God's love became a living, breathing person in the world. God with us.

Anyone who has given birth knows this reality. It is painful and noisy, scary and messy, and nothing about it is predictable. And yet, and yet, it is also the most incredible feeling of love ever known. You would give anything, even your life for this tiny newborn baby. And Mary and Elizabeth knew this and sang this.

I must admit, after becoming a parent, Christmas felt different. Oh sure the first Christmas was all about the practical – changing diapers, rocking to sleep, burping, needs. Parenthood was a warm little body sleeping on my chest, rising and falling to the rhythm of her breath. As a friend of mine said, "you can say you love 'children' in the abstract, but when you love a child, you feel it in your body".

As one pastor writes, Jesus grew and went about touching the sick to heal them, whether or not they were considered "clean." He fed hungry crowds. He took children in his arms and blessed them. Hurting and hopeful people felt his love in their actual bodies. Jesus gave them hope and wholeness that made a difference in their bodies. And his ultimate gift was the gift of his own body, broken and offered for us, raised and exalted for us. God's love has a body, and it's all because of what happened on Christmas.

We are still hungry and thirsty for God. How blessed we are, then, that God's love still has a body. We are Christ's body now. It is our hands he uses to heal, to feed, to bless his people. It's inevitable that every year we get caught up in the frenzy of consumption that our culture wants to hang on Christmas. My hope for you this Christmas, is that through the people that surround you, you might be touched in a way that makes God, who loves you more than you can possibly imagine, real and present to you, and that you in turn might touch someone else in the same way. (4) Immanuel, God really with us.

One of the greatest theologians that ever lived, Karl Barth, was asked to be a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the end of a captivating closing lecture, the president of the seminary announced that Dr. Barth was not well and was quite tired, and

though he thought that Dr. Barth would like to be open for questions, he shouldn't be expected to handle the strain. Then he said, "Therefore, I will ask just one question on behalf of all of us." He turned to the renowned theologian and asked, "Of all the theological insights you have ever had, which do you consider to be the greatest of them all?"

It was the perfect question for a man who had written literally tens of thousands of pages of some of the most sophisticated theology ever put into print. The students held pencils right up against their writing pads, ready to take down verbatim the premier insight of the greatest theologian of their time. Karl Barth closed his tired eyes, and he thought for a minute, and then he half smiled, opened his eyes, and said to those young seminarians, "The greatest theological insight that I have ever had is this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The Bible, even with all those clauses and conditions and the spelling out of consequences, is the greatest love story ever written. I am so grateful that [Advent] comes around once a year to remind us that God isn't in the business of keeping books and tallying ledgers, nor is God concerned about our status or position in Life. (5) Its about love. Crazy, irrational, messy, beautiful, eternal love. God's love for us. God in us.

Remember how young Jesus was when he died. He probably spent 90 percent of his entire life with his mother Mary. She formed him. She taught him how to love, she teaches us all how to love. Everyone needs to know that God loves us both like a father and a mother. Mary reflects the way a mother loves a newborn child and this is the way God loves us. It is the way we are to love all children.

In another church I served, they let the children choose what part they wanted to be in the Christmas Pageant and if they didn't have the costume all ready, they created it. So that year among the sheep and shepherds and donkeys and wise men, was a rainbow unicorn, yes, a rainbow unicorn. So I say, let the children wear wings of silver and sing like angels, carry crooks like shepherds and wear shiny robes bearing gifts, remembering the story - maybe not the star hovering over the manger! – let's not go that crazy – and I say let **all of us** become part of the story with our questioning, dreaming, seeking, singing, singing. And let us all become a little child-like during this season, because if we don't, we will never see all of the signs of love, God's love, all around us, Immanuel, God really with us.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee and us. Amen.

- (1) Lewis, The Rev. Karoline, "Advent as a Way of Life", [www.workingpreacher.com](http://www.workingpreacher.com)
- (2) Eidson, the Rev. Kara. Stay Awhile: Advent Lessons in Divine Hospitality, p. 56
- (3) Lose, The Rev. David. "Singing as an Act of Resistance." 12/14/2015
- (4) Baer, The Rev. David. "Tidings of comfort and joy".
- (5) Adams, The Rev. Bill. "The Original Love Story: A Sermon for Christmas Eve"