

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI

THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 23, 2018

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Advent Litany

Based on Psalm 103

*Bless, O bless the Lord, my soul,
all within me, praise the Lord!
In the fullness of my life,
ever is God's name adored!
Who redeems my sinful soul,
makes my fainting spirit whole.
High as heaven above the earth
is the Lord's redeeming love;
far as east from west is laid,
so with God, our sin does fade.
for God's love is ever birthed,
onto those who sing God's worth,
Lord of heaven, in faithfulness
may I never cease to bless.*

The Scripture

Luke 1:46-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

The Message

Jar Full of Love

Nick Larson

Love remakes the world.

Lighting a candle is one of our traditions during the season of Advent. This week our candle is the one of love that shines against the shadows of hate. Reading Luke's account of Mary's response to her visit, (last week's Scripture), with Elizabeth casts

this candlelight as a story of a loving God who works through loving relationships. It is a telling of a God who enacts “love” as an unfolding force in history, taking shape through generations of ordinary, unexpected, vulnerable people like Mary, the mother of God.

Just imagine for a minute that Gabriel has just delivered this astonishing news, and Mary responds with her world-changing, unbelievable, “Let it be.” And now, Mary this young, probably 14-year-old girl, traveled 80+ miles to her relative’s house in the Judean hills. Scenes like this featuring protagonists with no men present are rare for that time and even in the Bible. Luke is pushing hard to establish this bookend of Jesus’ life. There will be another bookend in his gospel account, one where there will be an empty tomb discovered again by a group of women, and here at the beginning is Mary, pregnant with God, and then again at the end of Jesus’ life. Luke is flipping the marginalization of women on its head. And this was well before 2018! It is women who are the center of this story.

What you heard so beautifully read as our Scripture is Mary’s song – called the *Magnificat* after the first word of the song in Latin. Scripture, and most Jewish writing, follows a simple principal that scholars refer to as the order of First Call or First Appearance. Essentially, when you read something, a detail that seems so critical to the story or oddly included, is typically referencing something else. When you come across that detail, ask yourself, “Where does this detail or reference appear before?”

Here, Mary’s song evokes another strong, female song, Hannah’s song (1 Samuel 2:1-10), which was bold and visionary. Here, Luke’s story demonstrates he wants you to know Mary was well acquainted with the history of Israel’s relationship with God. Thanking God for Samuel, Hannah sings of divine majesty and power, painting a picture of God as a master of reversals. God will raise up the poor from the dust, even as the bows of the mighty are broken.

The entire Christmas story, really the entire story of God’s people, is a story about this reversal. The world tells us that we are mere slaves to human desires and wants. This story answers by saying that the human one is the very image of God.

Mary is a peasant girl, not a Roman citizen, not of noble birth, not even of importance in or among her own people, and she was chosen to bear the King. Jesus was born among the animals, because there was no room in the inn. The first people God invites to see the Christ are the night-shift shepherds, who by the very virtue of their profession were ritually unclean.

This story is a call for us to humble ourselves before God. It is a God’s call or reversal, to reset our lives. Mary, no doubt, taught Jesus about God’s preference for the humble.

It clearly becomes an important theme in Jesus' ministry, and we hear it all over in Mark, Matthew, and Luke's gospels (Luke 14:11, Mark 10:43, Matthew 20:16).

No doubt about it, this is wildness and absurdity, and here we come face to face with God's upside-down world inaugurated by the God-bearer Mary, carrying the Christ, singing about the social hierarchies of her day, lampooning and subverting each of them with love. Love for the lowly, love for the humble, love for neighbor, love for those who turn the cheek, love for those who walk the second mile, the wild unfathomable love for any other, the love embodied in the kindness from and to the stranger exemplified by the Samaritan on the road.

Our world right now, suffers from a serious lack of this very form of love. We have instead chosen to love ourselves, to love what we can acquire, to dominate rather than have dominion over. The world suffers from too many that grasp at power, it suffers from too many grabbing after insatiable consumeristic appetites, making and changing reality itself to serve only themselves.

This Savior, the one announced here in Mary's song, though he was the very form and image of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, arriving as a vulnerable child to an underage, unwed, young, peasant woman.

If we wish to conserve the true meaning of Christmas, we must remember that the birth of Christ isn't about dominant groups using their religion to discriminate against others. Exactly the opposite. Jesus and the Holy Family were marginalized from the beginning by the most dominant groups in society. Christmas is about God identifying with and choosing, a peasant woman with a heart for justice and God.

It doesn't look like two "Christians" unwilling to talk to each other again because of who they voted for in the last election. It doesn't look like Christian's-on-the-left thinking Christians on-the-right just don't understand the "real" Jesus; and Christian's-on-the-right thinking Christians on-the-left are heretical and hypocritical humanists.

Divisions are intensifying. Relationships are being shaped and defined based political points of view. All that should make for a not very merry Christmas when family gathers this year.

Yet, we need to remember that love comes first. We in this congregation have now spent more than six decades together living and yes, even sometimes, even fighting with each other. Yet we know what this love feels like. As one of Christ's churches, Broadway Christian Church come from many diverse backgrounds, but we are committed to being one church not only birthed in love but learning to live in love!

So, around the Christmas table, with family and friends, or whomever you choose to gather, let love come first. Let the differences that you think or believe fade away and be replaced by a deeper love and appreciation that that kooky uncle, or unbearable aunt, or frustratingly opinionated sibling. Remember they, too, are the face of Jesus. Look upon those you disagree with this season as a baby who needs love and nurturing to grow.

It is easy to reduce and push aside the themes of Advent, of waiting. Yet the call of Advent is to remain awake to what God is about and is always doing in the world. It's easy to take hope and reduce it to simple optimism. It is difficult to shake off peace when it seems like passive appeasement or roll over acceptance. The thing is that so many of us give up on real joy and instead try to settle for simple happiness. It's so easy to reduce love to love of hotdogs, fast cars, and cat videos on the internet.

Love, in our language, is so wide spread that it often is reduced, spread thin, pushed out of the realm of the radical and the unconditional. Love, agape love of Christ, the love that loved you long before you were created that will be there long after everything has disappeared. That type of love, the type of love that demands you to understand that you are already precious, with a preciousness that is totally and quite immeasurable. That love remakes lives. That love remakes communities. That love remakes and transforms the world.

It fills life with goodness and laughter and joy. It beats back pride and violence to spread peace that passes all understanding. It is hope that demands that we stand up, and look up, and be alert, despite the apocalyptic chaotic events of life, that there is something still coming on the horizon, and that something is love.

Others may claim that hope means that we only look for the best, but God says, see and believe in the best. Others may claim that peace means that we must tolerate the state of things, hunkering down till we are wiped off. However, God says, "Honor and trust that any condition can be resolved for goodness." Others may claim that joy is simply doing what makes you happy. But God says, "Do anything and everything you do choosing to act in joy, because Christ is standing right in front of you." Other may claim and dismiss love as liking, fondness, appreciation or even kindness. God says, "Love is filled with wonder, awe inspiring, breath taking purity and power that changes us and affirms us as beloved children of our Creator."

Optimism is human; hope is divine. Acceptance is human; peace is divine. Happiness is human; joy is divine. Want is human; love is divine.

We must realize that we ourselves are barren, therefore, we can become expectant. For hope to be born, optimism must die. For peace to come, acceptance must be left behind. For joy to fill us, happiness must fade. For love to come, want must cease.

We must nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception of the world, we must fight off the idea that only the strong get what they want, while the weak suffer. Because we know God's love, we see an alternative to that worldview. Not just a concept, but a person, a human one who lived it.

At the heart of it all, Mary proclaims a vision of renewed, faithful, day-by-day cultural fruitfulness not as a survivalist manifesto, but as a call for shalom, for peace and wholeness. We are called to be a blessing and a light to the nations, including our enemies. Work towards Shalom. Hear this call of love that is for the common good, to a flourishing economy of justice and a regenerative ecology that is desperately needed in a world that seems to be collapsing once more all around us. This vision of Love that Mary sings about, calls us to restored relationships. It's practical and generous. It's humble.

Love means to build houses in a culture of homelessness. Love means to plant gardens in polluted and contested soil. Love is being committed to a single partner in a culture of sexual consumerism. Love is making commitments in a world where we want to always keep our options open. Love is multiplying in a world of debt. Love is sharing peace in a violent world of geo-political conflicts and tense holiday tables. Love is taking less to improve economic disparity. This is Mary's subversive call of love to each of us.

Christmas, the coming of Christ once more into our midst, needs to be a time to look beyond our differences and remind ourselves the power of love to overcome them. Or as our Board Chair, John Poehlmann, prayed at our December board meeting: "God gave us rules for life and wrote them in stone for us, but we aren't the best students at times, so God came to walk and talk with us. We expected a military general, so God sent us a baby. We expected to see God's Son in the grandeur of a castle or temple, so God gave us glimpses in a cattle trough."

In this season of lights and gifts, God help us be a light for Christ, who is continually revealing Godself in our life and world.

So, may the Word of God, which came through Mary, a peasant, unwed teenager, come also to you. In this season of births and rebirths, may the Word that calls forth shoots from dead stumps, a people from dry bones, sons and daughters from the stones at our feet, babies from barren wombs, and life from the tomb – may this word, which is stronger than strength, mightier than might. May it be for you a jar overflowing with love that staves off hate.

As Mary sang, Christ is coming (again) will fill the hungry with good things, scatter the proud, and lift up the lowly. God seeks to captivate your heart, not conquer it. God

seeks to open your mind, not to crack your skull. We, of course, will continue to miss this love God has for us, but the contest between God and us is not one of power – only endurance. God will show us that love never ends and always wins.

Thanks be to God. Amen.