

Not Alone

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

December 20, 2020

The Fourth Sunday of Advent - Love

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Text: Luke 1:26-45

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Prayer

Sermon

This is a season more for poetry than theology, so today I begin and end my reflections with the poetry of Madeleine L'Engle.

Annunciation

by Madeleine L'Engle

To the impossible: Yes!

Enter...

O Spirit. Come and bless

This hour: the star is late.

Only the absurdity of love

Can break the bonds of hate.

Love impossible, love absurd, love unexpected, love that takes risks. If there is one most important message of Christmas, it is this: God loves us. We are not alone.

We are not alone. We live in God's world. God loves us and we are not alone. God would do anything to make her love clear to us.

As we travel through this Christmas,
Without bells or whistles,
Without Revels, with only virtual Messiah sings,
And even without hugs,

Even without any of these things,
God is making haste to us,
The Christ Child is and will be born,
The meaning of his birth somehow more important than ever:

We are not alone. We live in God's world. God loves us and we are not alone. God would do anything to make her love clear to us, would be born into human existence. Nothing is impossible with God.

The candles burn brightly as a reminder of Emmanuel, God with us, the flame shining in the dimmest and scariest times.

In this time, in spite of it all, we declare that God's steadfast love is established forever (Psalm 89:2).

From the very first stories recording in scripture, God has shown up, offered love, and given hope. When Sarah and Abram wondered how it could be that there would be a child, the response came like Gabriel's: "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" (Gen 18:14), like God's response to Hagar and God's fiery message to Moses, like God doing a new thing for a people in exile. Again and again, scripture testifies that God's love shows up. God's steadfast love gives hope.

Mary was just an ordinary Jewish teenager in Roman-occupied territory. Poor, it's likely. Facing a hard life. Lowly, by every definition.

So Gabriel's words to Mary were
Shocking, surprising, stunning, improbable....
They announced her part in the story of salvation,
In God's love story with humanity.

She was perplexed, but she said yes.

Mary may have felt lonely and lowly and unlikely...

But Gabriel says: Don't be afraid. You are not alone. Nothing is impossible with God. This is good news.

And Mary, because she knew God, knew the story of a God whose love for people was steadfast, Mary could say yes, could say, Here I am, servant of a God whose love is deep and vast and eternal. Let it be with me according to your word. She could move into her part of the good news with courage and bravery. As Rev. Richard Wills says, "Absolute wonders and impossible dreams can occur when one's self-determination is available and aligns with God's determination and dream...."¹

We may feel alone, unlikely and lowly...
Surely this year, it all may seem impossible.

This year

¹ The African-American Lectionary Commentary

The angel who says
Don't be afraid. You are not alone. God loves us so much God would even be born in the form of a child, to walk this life along side us. Nothing is impossible with God. There is good news. All will be well...

Is especially important.

A welcome if surprising messenger,
Calling us to be brave,
To share that steadfast love,
To do our part in the story,
To align with God's determination and dream.

Mary was not the savior,
But she said yes to being part of the story of salvation.

We who follow Jesus
Also say yes
To being part of the story
When we align with God's determination and dream.

The words of Madeleine L'Engle, written many years ago, are so relevant this Christmas:

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.
He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.
He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

*He did not wait till hearts were pure.
In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.
He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!
Amen.*

“God is here and God is love.
We are not alone. Thanks be to God for a love like that. Amen.”²

² These words are from the Sanctified Art liturgy for this day.