

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT: LOVE

“The Threat of Love”

I love the music of the Christmas season. It always fills me with great joy and peace, but I loved it even more fiercely when I was an adolescent. And when I was growing up, there was one Christmas song that I was fascinated by: “Give Love on Christmas Day.” It did not matter to me which cover it was or who was singing it, every opportunity I could find, I would listen to “Give Love on Christmas Day.” My family even told me one time that while I was lying down, they came back to where I was and heard me singing “Give Love on Christmas Day” in my sleep!

The song and its lyrics always appealed to me. Everyone was talking about gifts and presents around Christmas time, but I did not think enough people were talking about love. So many folks were focusing their attention on money and credit cards, but no one was thinking about charity or kindness. The song reminds me, to this day, of the ways in which, “Even the man who has everything would be so happy if you would bring” love. I still get excited when I hear lyrics like, “The man on the street and the couple upstairs all need to know there’s someone who cares.”

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, when our Advent theme for the week is love, my mind immediately went to this type of love that one hopes to encounter at Christmas time. My mind went to this brand of cheerful, feel-good, warm-and-fuzzy type of love. The Gospel lesson for today, however, adds a portrait of the love of Advent in a seemingly different light.

As we shift our attention to the lectionary text for today, we encounter the early portion of the Gospel of Luke’s nativity narrative. In the account that the Gospel of Luke provides, the first chapter begins with the announcement of the forthcoming birth of John first, not Jesus. Scripture informs us that an angel appears to Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, and tells them to “Fear not! Your prayer has been heard and your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John.” The angel Gabriel tells them that even before his birth, John will be filled with the Holy Spirit and that he will be the one that makes the people ready for the coming of the Lord. Just as the angel said, Elizabeth conceived and now has John the Baptist in her womb.

Not long after, scripture tells us that the angel Gabriel then visits Nazareth, to a virgin named Mary who was engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. The angel says to Mary, “Fear not! For you have found favor with God, and now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most-High, and he will reign over the house of Jacob, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” The angel then tells Mary to go and visit Elizabeth, her relative, because she, in her old age, has *also* conceived a son.

Our Gospel lesson for today comes from this point in Luke’s narrative; Mary sets out and goes to Judea to visit Elizabeth, and as she approaches her, the baby John leaps in Elizabeth’s womb. At this point, Mary is beginning to recognize just how important and significant this Christ child in her womb will be. The reading for today is known as the Song of Mary, or the *Magnificat*, wherein Mary responds to Elizabeth and to the Christ Child that she is now carrying.

Advent, you see, is the period of the year in which we wait for Christ to come. Advent is the time of our liturgical calendar in which we gather in expectancy and in anticipation of both the Nativity of Jesus and of the second coming of Christ to the earth. Advent comes from the Latin word, literally meaning the “coming.” As followers of Christ, we have the Advent season to prepare our hearts and our minds for the *coming* of Christ – and to work about making his path straight.

In this *very first* Advent, however, the ones who are doing the waiting and the expecting are his mother, Mary, and his cousins, Elizabeth and John. The people were promised a Messiah, and they have been waiting on one to arrive for centuries, and now in this time, the angel of the Lord has come to Mary and told her that the Messiah is coming, that the Christ is on his way, that the expectancy of Jesus is near – *and* that Mary was going to be the one that would carry him.

Mary's response, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, really can be read as a praise toward God's love. Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord! For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." And not only does Mary recognize what great things the Christ child will do for her, but she also recognizes the love of God that will be expressed toward all peoples. She says:

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 has sent the rich away empty.

In an unexpected turn from the norm, Mary defines this coming infant with power and might.

Hold up just one minute! Wait a second! I thought this week's Advent theme was about love! All of this sounds violent and harsh. Strength in his arm? Scattering people? Bringing people down? This is starkly different from the "Give Love on Christmas Day" lyrics that mean so much to me!

In this season of waiting and expectancy, focusing on today's Advent theme of love, this text really points us toward a different conclusion: the *threat* of love. Those two words are seemingly counterintuitive: threat and love. The phrase itself, *the threat of love*, can almost be perceived as purely oxymoronic; how can love be threatening and how can a threat be loving?

I am reminded, however, that we are talking here about the gospel, and the gospel is always doing the unexpected and the gospel is always going against norms and against the status quo. Today's gospel reading, in particular, is from Luke's gospel which has a special slant in its writing toward role-reversals and toward turning the world upside-down, which is really right-side-up.

Yes, I do believe that the threat of love is the good news for us today, my sisters and my brothers. The good news for us today in this Advent season is that the coming of Christ will be both loving and it will be threatening, both at the same time. In Mary's Song, we are reminded of just how loving our God is.

We are shown here how God loves humanity enough to take on flesh and dwell among us. We are shown here how God loves us by sending to the world the Word, Jesus the Christ.

We are shown here how God loves all of creation, sending divinity down to humanity.

In Mary's Song, however, we are also reminded of the ways in which the love of God can also be threatening. No, no, I am not suggesting that the love of God is full of anger and wrath. No, no, I am not proposing that the love of God is just a deception wherein love is mistaken for abuse. Rather, the gospel reading for today shows us the ways in which God's love for humanity, as displayed through the Advent of Christ, loves us so much that it is a *threat* to those things that would separate us from that love.

Go back to today's scripture; God's love for humanity means it is a threat to oppression and power. In a preferential desire to truly love the lowly, the meek, and the hungry, there is this threat to love:

This love is threatening to those who are proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

This love is threatening to those who think they are powerful on their thrones.

This love is threatening to those who are rich, who abound in excess.

The Advent of Christ displays to us how the *threat of love* is included in the coming of Jesus. And if that

is the case, what does that have to say about us? What is the 'so what' question that should be burning in our hearts and in our minds? What does Mary's Song have to teach us about love in this season of Advent and Christmas, and in our attempts of faithful discipleship?

The Advent of Christ empowers us to *also* threaten to love. We are called to be disciples of Christ, to follow in the ways of justice and righteousness. For us, that means we are also beckoned to continue in the tradition of loving others in such a way that it is threatening to those who would seek to oppress or marginalize. And this kind of love is dangerous; this kind of love is risky. But yes, that means we are given the opportunity to love and to care for others so strongly and so fiercely that it will be a danger and a menace to those in power.

Imagine with me: What would *this* type of love look like in our daily lives? Really, think about it: How would our nation and our world be different if we dared to love in *this* way, a love that challenges systems and opposes institutions? What type of Christians would we be if we threatened to love others so much that the church became a menace to society and culture?

This is our faithful response: to threaten to love.

This is our reasonable portion: to threaten to love.

This is our responsible discipleship: to threaten to love.

As the Advent of Christ teaches us, let's threaten to love those whom society says are unlovable.

Let's threaten to love those whom humanity oppresses and marginalizes.

Let's threaten to love the ones whom our culture neglects and deserts.

Let's threaten to love the very ones whom our churches demonize and vilify.

Let's threaten to love the lowly, the hungry, the needy, the less fortunate, and the poor.

Let's threaten to love the looked over, the casted aside, the broken, the abused, the kicked out, the put out, the forced out, the shut out, and the left out.

As the Advent of Christ teaches us, let's threaten to love in this season.

Let's threaten to love in such a way that speaks out against the injustices of this world.

Let's threaten to love in such a way that calls out those in positions of power.

Let's threaten to love in such a way that embraces others wholly and fully.

Let's threaten to love in such a way that brings joy to those whom are without joyful living.

We ought to threaten to love in such a way that shines a light to those in the valley, loving and working them as they are trying to make it home.

In the name of the One who was, and who is, and who is to come, Amen.

Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

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