

“Love Fulfilled”

Luke 1: 39-56

December 18, 2022 4th Sunday of Advent

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You might recall, during worship two Sundays ago we heard the angel, Gabriel, speak to Mary, announcing to her that she was to be the God-bearer. Can you imagine? There really isn't language to capture all of the feelings that must have washed over Mary. Certainly, one of the top five must have been fear. So naturally, we reflected on fear. We talked about the countless times that “do not be afraid” and “fear not” shows up in the Bible, and how often we ourselves need to hear such phrases.

Last week, Joseph was the one who awoke from a dream after an angel told him not to be afraid, to go ahead and marry this woman, already pregnant, destined to bring the savior into our world. In both cases, Mary and Joseph said “yes” to these immense, unknowable calls. They responded with a yes in spite of their fear.

The beauty of our exploration of these stories throughout Advent is that we witness the incredible narrative that leads to the birth of Jesus – of God walking among us. We're also invited to imagine ourselves in these stories, which has the potential to shape our lives and transform our hearts. Through this beautiful story of friendship, connection, love, and praise, we get to imagine ourselves and the ways these elemental qualities play out in our own lives.

Today, we pick up right where we left off in the Gospel of Luke from two weeks ago. As soon as Gabriel departs, Mary quickly sets off for the home of her relative, Elizabeth. We know that Elizabeth herself is experiencing a miraculous pregnancy, as Gabriel noted, “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. For nothing will be impossible with God.” (Luke 1: 36-37) Elizabeth's pregnancy will bring forth her son John, who grows up to be known as John the Baptist, the minister who prepares the way for Jesus.

When Mary arrives (perhaps unannounced), Elizabeth doesn't just welcome her—she is filled with the Holy Spirit and speaks a blessing upon Mary as her own child leaps and kicks within her womb. She sees how God is at work and names it out loud. In this moment of profound solidarity, Mary

and Elizabeth see the divine in one another. This connection inspires Mary to sing her radical hymn of praise, declaring how God's liberating love remains steadfast throughout the ages.

Throughout Advent, we're using worship resources from "A Sanctified Art." I was touched by a story from Dr. Christine J. Hong, the minister and theologian who is providing commentary throughout their worship materials. Her story then activated memories in me from my own story. Dr. Hong writes: "My parents are Korean immigrants. My mother used to say that back in the days of their immigration, whoever met you at the airport decided your destiny. In other words, whoever greets you at the threshold as you become a new immigrant determines the direction your life moves. I remember her words and reflect on them whenever I reach significant impasses in my life—a new job, a move, when I became a parent for the first time. Each significant milestone feels like a threshold. When I prepare to cross those thresholds, I look for the people and communities waiting on the other side, people and communities to anchor me and hold me in the nebulous spaces of change, uncertainty, and fear." She later reflects, "My parents arrived and were greeted by Korean American people who embraced them, settled them, and invited them to participate in building sustaining faith and peoplehood together."

As you might imagine, Reverend Christine's reference to the milestones of moving and beginning a new job brought up in me memories of my experiences just over this past year. I have been so touched and deeply humbled by the support and care the Tippe community has showered on me and on my family as we've gotten settled here – especially in the midst of your own tender feelings while transitioning from a beloved and long-serving pastor to an unknown entity coming from another tradition!

Each of us have been experiencing times chock full of threshold moments over a protracted period – as I've just described, my transition to a new state and a new community. In yours, the transition to a new pastor. For all of us, adapting to the many ways COVID continues to impact our lives. We're striving to resume our busy schedules, restart meaningful ministries, and deepen community together despite the many challenges.

Amid such demands, I am moved and inspired by today's text, which so powerfully illustrates love being poured over these threshold moments. Elizabeth greets Mary on the threshold, not only of her door but the

threshold of something new in Mary's life and for the world. Mary is met by her cousin who greets her with welcome, anticipation, and a powerful blessing. So rich was the blessing that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leapt up and greeted Mary and the baby in Mary's womb. Any fear Mary had was met with the contagious courage of Elizabeth, courage enough for them both. They were one another's spiritual midwives—birthing together transformation, grounded in one another's courage and steadfastness. They wondered together in liminal space, on the threshold of a new world. And through their spiritual and relational partnership, Mary and Elizabeth framed the path of partnership for their children too.

They witness in one another that they are walking the path of love fulfilled – the birth of their children fulfills prophecies from the wisdom tradition they were immersed in; the very same wisdom that we continue to tap into. From generation to generation, we are called to see God in each other. Over this past week, while facilitating our Divine Intervention ministry, it has been pretty effortless to see that of God in front of me, as love appears in countless threshold moments.

I have seen God -

In the Divine Intervention guest who leads us in table grace
In the staff person who gets up early to make pancakes and eggs for everyone every Sunday morning
In the guest who wipes out the microwave without being asked
In the staff person who buys dinner for all of DI when the scheduled meal didn't arrive
In the guest who realized a newly referred guest got confused by the directions to get to Tippe and helped her walk from the library to our doors.

This is love – love poured out for others as they step over thresholds of change and adjustment/to community and connection.

This final Sunday of Advent, we focus on love. And as we turn again to today's text, we hear love being poured out in Mary's song of praise. This song, which is often referred to as the Magnificat, is known to be one of the most ancient Christian hymns.

Today we recognize Mary's Magnificat as a rousing freedom song of the poor. Mary, the lead singer, epitomizes the lowly of Israel, those

marginalized by society, for whom there is “no room in the inn” (Luke 2:7). God is her only hope, and she sings the divine praises with passion and confidence.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a theologian-martyr executed by the Nazis, spoke these words in a sermon during Advent 1933:

The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is that passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.

Mary’s hymn was revolutionary – she was living in a time of revolt against heavy taxation, amid poverty and hunger. Mary witnessed God within and among the members of her community. She believed that God can turn the world upside down; that the last are first and the first last; the humble are exalted, the exalted humbled; those who save their life lose it, those who lose their life save it; those who mourn will rejoice, those who laugh will cry; the mighty are cast down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up. Mary was convinced that in God’s kingdom the poor are first, and the prostitutes, publicans and outcasts of society eat at the table of the Lord.

Mary illustrates a deep and abiding love for every person, recognizing that we are each a child of God. And every Advent, we are reminded of the power of this thinking and being and doing. From generation to generation, we can see how God is at work in our relationships. We find God in each other. The way we see the divine in each other impacts how we live and move in the world. When we view every human being as a child of God, we generate a different world.

May we be guided and strengthened by this vision. Amen.