

## **Waiting for Love**

December 24, 2017 – Advent 4

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Text: Luke 1:26-56

Finally, we have arrived at the Fourth Sunday of Advent – usually that comes a few days before Christmas Eve – this year it comes a few hours before Christmas Eve. Much of the waiting for Christmas is over; indeed, some of you have probably already celebrated Christmas, at least partially. But Advent isn't really about waiting for Christmas, even though it seems that way. Advent is a time to remind us of the way we are always waiting for the fulfillment of God's dream – that fulfillment that Jesus called the kingdom of God. And when we think of God's dreams, the themes of the Advent candles make so much sense: Hope, Peace, Joy, and now Love. For surely God's Kingdom, the kingdom we hope for and work for, is the kingdom where peace, joy, and love prevail.

And today's readings tell us a lot about love from a Biblical perspective: love from God's point of view.

First of all, love is inviting. The angel comes to Mary and invites her to take part in God's mission by bearing this child. Mary has a chance to say "Yes." Her yes is important to the story. Love can't be forced.

Second, love meets us where we are, as we are. Love doesn't expect or insist upon perfection. Mary has questions, and the angel patiently answers them. Love doesn't come with an ultimatum.

Third, love is personal. Love affects people individually. The angel comes to Mary. Mary visits Elizabeth. Elizabeth blesses Mary. The tenderness between Mary and her much older cousin Elizabeth is a lovely picture of love – Elizabeth welcomes her young cousin Mary right away and with joy and blessing.

Fourth, love is incarnational. Remember incarnation means enfleshment – in the flesh. It comes from the same root word as carnivore, or flesh-eater. Love is lived out in real life, in the flesh, in our actions, in the nitty-gritty of the real world where our choices have real consequences. Love is not just about feelings, but about what we do. Christmas is sometimes called the Feast of the Incarnation – Christmas is about what God does, coming among us as one of us.

Risking the vulnerability of being born, and that brings us to number five—love leads to birth and rebirth. Love always leads to new possibilities. As we engage love with the vulnerability that love requires, that engagement with a lover, a friend, a colleague, or even God brings forth dimensions of who we can be, of how we can be. God's love for us, and our response to God's love lead to transformation.

And God desires that transformation for the world as well—this is what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, and this is what Mary is describing in her song of praise, the song we know as the Magnificat. And as the transformation that comes through love often upends us—remember falling in love?—so too does God’s love for the world have the potential of upending the way things are, so that the way things could be might be born. Again and again in the Bible, God talks of new ways, of a new order, of justice flowing through the world. Someone once said that justice is love lived out. And the upending that Mary sings of is the love of God reshaping the world. But of course, we’ve learned that this isn’t a process we watch—it’s a process we share in. That’s the hope part of the kingdom, the rolling up our sleeves and working for what we hope for. Hope is essential to love.

And hopelessness is dangerous. It has always been hard to believe in the dreams of God. We all know that we can’t make all the changes that need to happen in order for the world to be shaped by love. All too often, we are too easily convinced of our own powerlessness.

Edmund Burke, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Irish statesman has spoken of the danger of hopelessness: “Nobody made a greater mistake than he who did nothing because he could do only a little.” None of us can accomplish everything we’d like to—even the president has been learning about the limits of his power. But all of us can do something. Each of us can, for the love of God, respond to God’s deep love for us, and for the world.

As author Christine Valters Paintner wrote this week: “In the midst of so much sorrow and suffering in the world, to bring forth our own deepest dreams takes courage. To believe that when we follow the leadings of the Spirit that we can contribute to a world of deeper peace and reconciliation requires hope. To bring forth the vision, the seed of new possibility, demands great love.”

Mary was a poor girl in a time when neither women nor the poor had much power, but she said “Yes” to God and changed the world. Elizabeth was old, and yet she could bless Mary as she proclaimed the dream of God. We can all pray. We can all treat others kindly. We can all choose affirmation instead of condemnation. Each of us can impact the experience of everyone who interacts with us. Children can offer comfort to one another and to adults. Even people who find themselves on the receiving end of care can be encouragers to those who care for them.

A different world is possible, but not if we sit on the sidelines. At Christmas we will celebrate what God has done in coming among us as Jesus. What Jesus did was to invite us into the mission of the kingdom.

The angel told Mary that with God, all things are possible, but it’s with us, too, that all things are possible—God needs us to be ready to risk for justice, to risk for God’s kingdom, to risk for love. Madeleine L’Engle wrote a poem called *The Risk of Birth*. It goes like this:

*This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war & hate  
And a comet slashing the sky to warn*

*That time runs out & the sun burns late.*

*That was no time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn-  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by a comet the sky is torn-  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.*

Can we take risks for God's sake? Can we respond to God's invitation, remembering that God meets us where we are, as we are? There's a saying that God takes us as we are, but doesn't leave us as we are. As we live out the realities of love, as we incarnate God's dreams, as we engage with God in the nitty-gritty of life, we will be changed, and we will, like Mary, be a voice for God's YES in a world that all too often says no to love.

If we are waiting for love, it will never come. But if we are choosing to love, anything is possible.

Amen.