

December 20, 2020 - 4th Sunday of Advent - Sermon

2 Samuel 7:1-11; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

“God’s Love”

You may have guessed by now that I’m a fan of the season of Advent. Quite often I have been urged to include more Christmas music in the weeks prior to Christmas and I’m inclined to deny that request because of my attitude toward Advent. Part of the reason for that, as I’ve expressed on many occasions, is to attempt to slow down and appreciate the moments leading up to the frenzy of Christmas. The culture in which we live rushes to the party without spending much time in contemplation and I believe a huge portion of the message found within the birth of the Messiah is missed because of that rushing. God’s messages of hope, peace, joy, and love are meant for all times but in particular they are meant to be heard during the weeks prior to the celebration of Christ’s birth. The season of Advent is also meant to help us think about the ultimate purposes of God for this world and to see Jesus’ birth within that larger context. ‘Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ are words which are often on our lips and it is during the season of Advent that a particular focus is placed on that coming kingdom as we prepare to celebrate the birth of its king. The themes of “Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love” have somewhat recently been attached to the four Sundays approaching Christmas Day because these four qualities will be elements present in the kingdom to come. At the centre of them all will be Love because, as St. John observed, ***“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected in us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgement, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, because perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us.”*** (1 John 4:16b-19) And so as we come to the last Sunday of Advent let us give thanks to God for the promise of his Kingdom to come and let us open our hearts and minds to grow in our understanding of love so that we may share it even more effectively than we do already.

In his first letter to the Corinthians St. Paul composed a description of love which has been read at weddings, funerals and has been an inspiration to many. He wrote that: ***“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrong. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices in the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”*** (1 Cor. 13:4-8) This lovely description of the love God has for God’s people is truly inspiring and a little daunting when we try to live up to its standard. One of the things St. Paul did not mention, but which can be inferred from his description, is that love obeys. On this 4th Sunday of Advent we are invited to join in remembering the Virgin Mary as we recall the angel Gabriel’s visit to her. The love of God was poured out on Mary in that moment and her love for God was seen in her obedience. Love obeys.

As St. Luke puts together his orderly account of the story of Jesus the Messiah he begins with a

visit from an angel named Gabriel to a priest named Zechariah. Zechariah had been asking God to bless he and his wife Elizabeth with a child and Gabriel had been sent to share the good news that his prayer had been answered but in a most remarkable way. Out of love for God both Zechariah and Elizabeth had been devoted and obedient servants of God and to them was given the gift of raising John the Baptist who would, “be great in the sight of the Lord” (Luke 1:15) The same angel, Gabriel, also visited a young betrothed woman named Mary. This story of the encounter between God’s messenger and the humble young woman has been painted, carved, sculpted, and depicted in countless pieces of other forms of art. (Luke 1:26-38) The astounding nature of the event has inspired and challenged generation after generation and Mary stands out as an example of a loving response to an incredible request.

You and I are probably not going to be asked to do something on that scale but we are sometimes asked by loved ones to do things that may be difficult. I have spoken with many parents who find themselves doing things they never thought they would ever do simply because the child they love asked them to do it. Those we love can get us to do things we are not comfortable doing simply because we love them. This is because if something is important to them it becomes, by definition, important to us. That is why I suggest that St. Paul missed ‘obedience’ in his definition of love but that it can be inferred. We all know this to be true from our own experience with love even if we haven’t thought about it in this way before. In the partnership that is a loving relationship obedience to the requests of the other is part of the dynamic relationship. Mary, out of love for God and God’s plan acts with obedience to this awesome request and is forever remembered because of that decision.

“I am the Lord’s servant”, Mary answered, “may it be to me as you have said. Then the angel left her”. (v. 38) The humility we see in that response asks of us to explore our responses to God’s requests. We know the story of Mary because of her willingness to accept this challenge and we know the story of others because of their willingness to accept the challenges placed before them. While we may not ever be famous we can try to be as obedient as the Blessed Virgin Mary when requests come from God. As I think about the encounter between Mary and Gabriel once again I notice the following.

First, there was an existing and well cared for relationship between Mary and God. She is told, ‘you have found favour with God’ which suggests that the angel’s visit was to someone well known in the heart of God. This likely meant that as she went about her daily duties Mary prayed and thought about God a good deal. Synagogue attendance and attention paid to the practices she had learned from her parents was also likely a part of her life. The pre-existing relationship is not described in any detail but I believe it must have been in place in a very strong ways. The practice of prayer and other devotional actions are similar to the daily conversations we have with our loved ones here on earth. It was once observed that if a married couple only spent the amount of time some people spend thinking about God their marriage would end in ruins. Mary, it seems, spent time with God as well as maintaining relationships with those around her. I am encouraged by this because it tells me that my daily prayers and devotion to the practices I learned from my parents and others are important in

maintaining the relationship I have with God. Those practices have had to undergo some minor changes over the past few months but I am so glad they were instilled by my mentors over the years. That existing and well cared for relationship with God is one of the ways used for us to hear what God has in store for us.

Secondly, she had an active mind. This young woman was betrothed to Joseph and so thoughts of having children would not have been strange to her. Perhaps she even imagined what that would be like and what those children would be like. To be presented with the words, 'you will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus' wouldn't have been all that strange but to have the words attached to a visit from an angel made this a wonder. Her active mind asked for details in order to understand how this could happen given that she had not yet been married and was told, 'the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.' This could easily have frightened her but it seemed instead to steady her because her next words were, 'I am the Lord's servant'. The active mind, combined with her ongoing relationship with God helped bring her to the point of obedience.

Finally I notice, Mary had a very brave and trusting heart. Love builds that kind of trust and demands a level of trust as the relationship grows. Out of that trust can grow bravery because the trust provides a solid ground on which to stand. Mary recognized her place in the history of the nation and the importance of her role but it did not make her shy away from the challenge. In her song, known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), Mary traces the history of her people and looks into the future based on the promises of God. All in all Mary was a remarkable young woman who became a hero in the story of the arrival of the Messiah and the growth of the plan for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. It takes bravery and trust to obey some of God's commands and we can look to Mary as an example of that bravery and trust. We can be encouraged to actively engage our intellect so that we understand as much as we are capable. We can continue to maintain and strengthen our relationship with God and with our sisters and brothers in the faith as the Virgin Mary must have done.

Love is patient, kind, and all the rest as described by St. Paul but love is also obedient to the requests made by those we love. Mary is a wonderful example of the combination of humility, courage, and trust as an exhibition of love for God and love for her people. May we take encouragement from her as we face our own particular challenges. I offer this prayer.

We beseech you, O Lord, pour your grace into our hearts, that we who have known the incarnation of your Son Jesus Christ, announced by an angel to the Virgin Mary, may by his cross and passion be brought unto the glory of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.