

Advent 4 – Love

Sermon: By Rev. Britt Aerhart, Salisbury United Church
Sunday, December 20, 2020

This is a curiously unsettled season, this Advent 2020. There's the Christmas rearrangements we are all making, and I have to admit to having been a bit immobilized for a time, trying to decide how to get together with family on Christmas Day in the lockdown circumstances we are in. (We have decided, by the way have a Zoom call and watch "A Christmas Carol Together" online.) And the weather, as usually, flip flops from one thing to another. The wind rattled the bathroom fan all last night and snow has dusted everything. A week ago (it was a week ago?), it was sunnier and almost 0. Tomorrow, we are also about to pass the shortest day of the year – or longest night, depending on your perspective and with being indoors at home so much we feel the shortness, or at least I do. Outside of our homes the earth has long since cooled and all smart animals have hidden themselves away in burrows and dens, their metabolisms as slow as slow can be, while they hibernate through the cold and wait for things to lengthen and grow warm enough to support life again.

One word to describe this kind of a curiously unsettled season in the word, "liminal". To talk about a liminal season is to talk about an in-between time between boundaries, kind of like when you cross a border leaving one country and are in the in-between zone at a land crossing or an airport when you have not yet cleared the entry point of the next country. You are in transit and have not yet arrived. You miss, perhaps, the territory you have just left behind but anticipate the territory you will soon arrive in. And in between you spend your time doing whatever is there to do in-between: walk, read, shop, eat, nap, watch the news, call somebody, talk with strangers. Even in in-between times there life presents itself to us as we move through and onto our next destination.

One of the things that we can do this year, if we are mobile, is we can drive through some of the neighbourhoods around us to see the Christmas lights and decorations on houses. Apparently driving in the car with others is not considered a social gathering, at least here in Alberta. I have heard that Christmas lights have had an upswing in sales, perhaps because it is one of the community oriented things we can still do - put lights outside at this time when daylight has shrunk to its smallest point of the year. I haven't done it yet so far, but I probably will at some point. There is something uplifting about watching the lights flow by from house to house, seeing bushes and trees draped in red or green or blue, seeing candy canes marching down a front walk in double formation. As if the whole collection of light announces some glimmer of anticipation, some hint of effort and warmth and love, which is hiding just around the next corner as you drive along.

Thinking about that anticipation of effort and warmth and love, you can also hear that same anticipation in the song of Mary, our first scripture reading today. She sang that song on the day she entered a kind of liminal season because of the news the Angel brought her: “Be not afraid,” the angel said, “you have found favour with God.” She was told she would bear a child soon but not yet. And, once she had absorbed the meaning of the angel’s visitation and once she had accepted the summons to be the Christ-bringer in her generation, she did the one thing that human beings have so often done when faced with being in-between one thing and the next. Mary gave voice to what it meant to her and her people to be able to look forward toward the border crossing that was to come. She sang.

And of course music is such a part of how we prepare for Christmas, so why wouldn’t Mary sing a song in anticipation of the birth of her first child. Only her song was not about chestnuts roasting over an open fire, or dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh, or hoping to get two front teeth for Christmas. No her words, her Christmas Carol which she sang after the birth announcement but before the birth went like this:

47.....my spirit rejoices in God52He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;53he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.54He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,....

You see, that’s what tends to happen in liminal seasons of life, you begin to dream of what might happen when that season is over, just as we do now when we imagine the time to come when this pandemic will be over. The imagination of what can be rises up in us, and like a particularly vivid dream what is about to happen becomes real even before it *is* real. So Mary sang, and it was truly a song for the ages, It was a song about liberation from oppression and poverty and injustice. Which is a whole different order of Christmas music that the songs we often sing about Christmas time.

Just how powerful was Mary’s song of liberation, well here’s another piece of Christmas trivia that might give you food for thought. Did you know that singing or reading of the Magnificat, as Mary's song is usually called, (Magnificat means “to be magnified” “to be enlarged”) was banned at various times in history? Apparently, so it has been said although with some speculation I should note, that the Magnificat was excluded from its traditional place in evensong in churches run by the British East India Company in India. Years later, so it has been said, Gandhi requested that this song be read in all the places where the British flag was being lowered on the final day of imperial rule in India. Of a more certain record is that the junta in Argentina forbade the song after the Mothers of the Disappeared displayed its words on placards in the capital plaza in Buenos Aires. (These were mothers who organized vigils because their children had been taken away by the secret police and never heard from again.) And during the 1980s, the governments of Guatemala and El Salvador prohibited any public recitation of the song.

Why you might ask?" Because it inspired people to think that colonial or oppressive totalitarian regimes could be resisted. Which is quite a thought to come from that one 2,000 year old Christmas carol. And to that piece of trivia all I can think of to say is, "Now that's a Christmas Carol! That's a dream! That's a magnificent!"

If truth-be-told, it's not like any of us, driving along in our rare moments of escape from home or the few places we might go, actually expect to sing a Christmas Carol like that. (Although why not I might ask?) At the end of the day, or the end of our short neighbourhood drive to watch the lights, we pretty well go home, come in off the road and enter our own place where we live. It may be empty like it has been for many, many days or years before this one. Or it may come with the spouse or parent or sibling you live with, the one you had the fight with just that morning. Or maybe that is the home you share with the invalid adult or child you have to take care of day in and day out. Or it comes with the bills you have yet to pay because you have lost your job in this pandemic shutdown, or maybe you have always been living life marginally and this year is more marginal than recent ones. And truthfully, we don't really expect Christmas to have the power to challenge all of our life circumstances the Mary did. So perhaps we need to hear Mary's Christmas song again now, and more clearly than we have before and maybe it can summon us to a renewed sense of spirit and love in the midst of our own life circumstances. Then we too can magnify God and be enlarged ourselves with the full meaning and full power of what the birth of Christ has meant and still means now, in our time.

There is a wonderful story about a man who was home with the children one afternoon while his spouse went out Christmas shopping. He was reclining on the couch, half sleeping, half watching a Netflix series on the TV, when the kids came into the room. "Dad, we have a play to put on? Do you want to see it?" He really didn't want to, he'd much rather continue binge watching, but he knew he needed to, so he sat up, came out of his slumber, and became a one-man audience.

His four children, four, six, eight, ten years old, were the actors: Mary, Joseph, the angels and the wise men. Joseph came in with a mop handle. Mary came in with a pillowcase under her pajamas; another child was an angel, flapping her arms as wings.

Finally the last child, the eight years old, came out, with all of the jewelry on that she could find in the house, her arms filled with three presents. "I am all three wise men," she said. "I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud." That's right you heard correctly: gold, circumstance and mud. Fortunately the father had enough sense not to laugh or correct the wise child who actually more correctly described the real life world into which Christmas comes than she realized. Because, at this time of year we come to the Christmas season as a mixed bag of gold, circumstance and mud. Gold,

because we all have something beautiful in us, a God-given light, that the world needs. And circumstance because we are all surrounded by circumstances not in our control and some of them more terrible than we will ever admit to. And mud because there is also a lot of muck laid down in human history which can strangely become the soil out of which new things can rise up and take root. And one of those things that arises out of human history is a child born in poverty in a manger. A Holy Child who grows among us to eventually speak to we human beings about our lives and world. A Holy One who calls us to account for how we live and love in the world and teaches that the true spirit of Christmas is a year long and life long event that leads beyond a stable to a cross. And at that cross everything is given up in order to find the new life that God brings, a life as Mary imagined it, when old arguments are settled, and lonely people realize they are not really alone, and the poor are fed and the homeless sheltered, when children are loved and protected by all of us, when tyrants fall and are called to account. That's the real Christmas, the one Mary stored up in her heart as she waited through her liminal time to give birth to her first child..

So for us now it's just five sleeps left 'til Christmas day. What are we storing up in our hearts for this Christmas time. Tomorrow we will arrive at the annual benchmark of the shortest day and longest night of the year. That winter solstice is a signal that we are on the other side of our Advent waiting - now on the downslope toward the celebration of Christ's birth. The Christ light is just around the next corner. The next time we see each other we will make our border crossing into a completely new territory, one it is said where our eyes shall at last see the light coming into the world again, as if for the first time. May the Christmas light bless your eyes and your heart when that day comes.

Amen.

Christmas Trivia 2020

1. In 1943 Judy Garland introduced a new song to Christmas audiences in the midst of WWII. It contained this line which Frank Sinatra later changed in his version of the song because he said it was not jolly enough:

Someday soon we all will be together
If the fates allow
Until then, we'll have to muddle through somehow

(We Wish You all A Merry Little Christmas)

2. On Christmas Even 1914 this Christmas Carol was sung during what came to be know as the WWI Christmas truce, when German and British soldiers left their trenches and mingled together in no man's land between the trenches.

(Silent Night)

3. This Christmas carol was sung by Welsh miners when Ebenezer Scrooge was take by the ghost of Christmas present to visit people around England who still remembered Christmas in their hearts.

(Hark The Herald Angels Sing)

4. This Christmas Carol was written before Kanata, the indigenous name for village, became Canada. It was written in the Huron language and a faithful translation of the first verse would be like this:

Have courage, oh you human beings: Jesus, he has come
The spirits in the sky have words to share with everyone

They've come to, in exulted voice, say Mary's given birth, Rejoice!
Jesous ahatonhia, Jesus is born, Jesous ahatonhia

(“Twas In the Moon of Wintertime” the “Huron Carol”)

5. This Christmas Carol does not contain a single detail about Jesus’ birth: no stable, no shepherds, no wise men; no Mary or Joseph; no little town of Bethlehem or choirs of angels or silent nights. It was written as a setting for Psalm 98 under the heading “The Messiah’s Coming and Kingdom”.

(Joy to the World)