

FOLLOW THE LIGHT TOWARDS LOVE

Luke 1:46 - 55

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I always forget, until it comes again, what the week before Christmas is like in the church. Some of the activity I remember all too well, and it's easy for you to imagine what it's like, too. Bulletins to print, keeping track of which music for which service, which people are reading scripture at which service...we have to remember to change the sign out front so people know when our Christmas Eve services are. I will be changing our voice mail message because a lot of people will be calling in the next few days. Our custodial staff will make sure all of our candles are ready and that the church is clean and prepared for a throng of guests. It is, of course, a busy time here. I remember that and expect that.

What I forget, until it delights me each year, is the other kind of busy-ness. The surprising and wonderful tasks that come to us. Someone drops off a frozen turkey. "I got this from work and I don't need it. Please give it to someone who could use it." This week it also was, "I was given enough meat for a family - it's all frozen - from Omaha Steaks - burgers, hot dogs, steaks, - please find a good home for it." I received a call on Tuesday, "I've been noticing someone at church who looks like they could use some help this year. What can I do for them for Christmas?" Gift cards arrive, food arrives, and we get to play the "middle man" - matching anonymous generosity with its recipients. It's a little hectic, sure, but I'll happily stay late for that kind of work, because it helps to make Christmas for me.

There is an impulse towards love that emerges at Christmas time. It comes, doesn't it, from all kinds of places. It comes from warm memories of Christmases where we felt surrounded by the abundance of family and food; it comes from the rewarding feeling of generosity; it comes from the one whose birth we celebrate, whose life was lived in love and through love and for love. At Christmas time, we realize that - despite the fact that much of life is out of our hands, sometimes there are certain things we can control. Sometimes we're able to find just the right gift for just the right person and create a moment of joy. We carol at the home of someone who's been feeling a little low and somewhat forgotten, and our time spent makes a real difference. We remember to say "thank you" to the harried postal worker, to give a tip to the people who serve us throughout the year, and we notice that those acts of kindness are genuinely appreciated.

When circumstances are good and healthy, parents expecting children feel love for those children even before they are born. A bond forms between a parent and a yet-to-be-born child. Sometimes the child is given a name, sometimes the child is talked to, sung to. Mary's song is a song of love to her yet-to-be-born child. She sings it after she has said "yes" to the angel. She sings it after she has visited her cousin Elizabeth who is also pregnant. Mary's song is a love song, but it's not sentimental. It starts by praising God for honoring her to be the one to carry the child Jesus, but it ends with words that sound more like an agenda.

We're going to sing this song as our middle hymn today and I encourage you to hear the passion in the words. This is not a lullaby; it is more a song of resistance, a song to sing while protesting, a song to sing while delivering meals to the hungry, a

song to sing while writing a letter to your legislators, urging them to pay attention to the needs of the poor.

Mary's song says that Jesus' birth signals that the world is changing. No longer will the old regimes and the old ways go unquestioned. No longer will people accept the status quo. It will no longer be acceptable to trample on the downtrodden and the oppressed, for the world is about to turn.

What Mary is singing is the agenda of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus came to lift up the lowly and to fill the hungry with good things.

It was an agenda of love, but not sentimental love, not gaze-into-one-another's-eyes-love, but a love that gets up and walks and works together.

Christmas asks us a question, which is, "Do you believe?" And I don't mean, "Do you believe that Jesus was born in Bethlehem?", even though some scholars say there never was a world-wide census. I don't mean, "Do you believe in the virgin birth?"

The important question Christmas asks is, "Do you believe in the power of love?" Do you believe that God works through human beings to turn our lives around, to turn the world around? Do you believe that love, that spirit we know as God, that person we call Jesus, has the power to turn the human race into the human family?

This is the season when some people see the light of love more clearly. They follow that light with acts of kindness and generosity. They throw out these tiny pebbles of love and find that the ripple effect is beautiful to watch. Not only are other people's lives transformed but their own lives turn, too. Their hearts become more empathetic, their words become less confrontational. They discover a strength that is

gentle and doesn't require bluster. And they become more and more drawn to the light, so that their own lives begin to reflect it.

We spent quite a bit of time this past year hearing stories of people who were witnesses to the light, people who are saints to others, because of the way they live and the values they hold. Howard Thurman is one of those saints of the past century, a preacher and civil rights leader. He once speculated as to what would happen if we embodied the spirit of love, not just at Christmas time but throughout the year. It is what we are called to do as people who bear the name of the Christ child. Not a sentimental love, but a love that demands that the world change. This is how he put it:

**“When the song of the Angel is stilled,
When the Star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers and sisters—
To make music in the heart.
And to radiate the Light of Christ,
every day, in every way,**

in all that we do and in all that we say.

The work of Christmas lies before us.”

If I only saw the spirit of love in this church at this time of year, I would find this ministry depressing and disheartening. But we don't just feed the hungry once a year. We don't just think about the homeless when it's cold outside. Our mission calendar is active all year round and the work in Jesus' name continues, thanks to each person here who gives of time and talent and treasure. It isn't just at Christmas time that I see what happens behind the scenes here. There are angels in our midst in every season.

May Christmas be a time that we fill our hearts so that we have more to give. May Christmas be a time when we allow God to work within us, so that our lives turn towards the light. May Christmas be a renewal of faith, reminding us of the power of love and the call of discipleship.

For we sing not just today but every day of the power of God's love to change us and turn us so that we can change the world.