

Bearer of Light
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United Church of Strafford, Vermont
December 18, 2022, Fourth Sunday of Advent, Sunday of Love
Luke 1:26-56

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary Sunday and Sunday of Love.

Once a young mother came home feeling exhausted from work. Her children were waiting for her to decorate the tree. It had been a dreary day, but as she got out of the car the clouds parted around one star. It was what she needed, a glimpse of hope and peace in the darkness, just enough to go in the house and shine, like an Advent star of joy and love for her children.

This is our task: to allow ourselves to be filled with the light that comes to us in the midst of darkness, and then pass that gift on to others. Let us open our hearts to whatever light we find here and allow it to shine after the service, extending our care and support especially to those we do not know or know are struggling, so all may go out from here shining greater light into the world.

Call to Worship— Advent can feel peaceful if we sink into quiet darkness with a candle, prayer or music. Yet we are waiting for someone born to an unwed, teenage refugee, a pregnant pawn being moved across an impoverished land by a heartless empire of power and wealth. We are waiting for a child who will lead us into conflict against the forces of selfishness, violence and greed.

Advent's contemplative nature seems incongruous, but it offers the secret to following where Jesus and Mary lead. Thomas Merton was a contemplative Trappist monk who was active in the Civil Rights and Peace movements. He wrote in his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, that Mary's great gift was emptying herself of self so she could be like a pure pane of glass through which the light of God's love could shine.

Advent waiting and watching in faith is the first step of the self-emptying that leads to inner transformation so that we bring more powerful Christ-like love into the world. Let us enter into the story of Mary, and listen for our own angel calling us, like her, to be transformed so that

we can help transform the world. We begin with Mary's response to what God is doing through her. Let us make it our own.

Call to Confession –

Holy God, we confess that when your angel comes
Announcing we are pregnant with God's gifts,
Telling us that we have Christ within us,
Blessing us with goodness and light
To deliver to the world, so often
We do not respond as Mary did.
We disbelieve or hide in fear or make excuses.
We let our busyness or plans distract us.
Please forgive us, O God.
Help us to begin anew now.
Help us to say as Mary did,
"Here am I, the servant of the Lord;
Let it be with me according to your word."
Help us have the courage, faith and humble love
To bring forth the gifts
You have given us to share.
Let us pray in silence...

Assurance of Pardon— The most common miracle in the universe is the Holy Spirit taking lifeless or lightless things and transforming and reordering them to be capable of life and light. It happens in galaxies, in compost bins and in our own hearts.

God's love and forgiveness free us from our past limited ways of being and guide us to greater life and light and love, and when that happens, Christ is born in us and through us.

So when we sing, O Come O Come Emmanuel, we really are calling on ourselves to give birth to our share of the Christ, calling on ourselves to be "God with us," as Emmanuel means. Come Emmanuel, we sing, be born through us each and through this church today...

Advent Candle Lighting IV

Jesus taught that everything in our whole religion comes down to loving God and loving our neighbor as our self. So today on this last Sunday of Advent we give the place of honor to the candle of love.

The scriptures talk about the light of God's love in Jesus Christ. Here is some of what the first letter of John says: "God is light....Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light....We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help...? God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.... The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also."

The word Advent means the approach or coming of something. We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ's light into the world. With Christ's advent come three forms of love: God's love of us; our love of God; and God's love and ours for all people and all creation. Christ's love is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome—a light that shines in us when we love.

Giving love is as much a gift as receiving love. So we do this with thanks to God for all the love we have received in our life, and for all the love we have been able to give to others. This Advent we ask that we may be as generous-hearted as Jesus was, who gave love to all people: old and young, healthy and sick, rich and poor, neighbors and enemies. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us find ways to shine the light of love especially on those who need it most in this darkest time of the year.

Let us pray together the Traditional Version of the Lord's Prayer...

Bearer of Light

The story of Mary is full of impossibilities, but there is a beautiful truth to it. The usefulness of the story comes not in spite of its impossibility, but because of it. It is like a Zen Buddhist koan, like contemplating the sound of one hand clapping. Something happens to our heart and mind if we seek meaning within the impossibility, expanding and reshaping our consciousness. Mary is our model in this, as in all things essential to being a bearer of light.

The White Queen told Alice in Wonderland that she practiced believing impossible things every day, sometimes as many as six before breakfast! We scoff at this because we know that if we stretch ourselves beyond the limits of our rational mind we risk entering the realm of foolishness or even madness.

But fools can be holy. Divine madness is what Plato called the inspiration of artists. It takes divine madness to challenge the powerful on their thrones and to stand with the poor and oppressed. It takes divine madness to follow a star or listen to angels. Jesus was clearly divinely mad, and so was Mary.

Once I was snowshoeing through a hardwood thicket when a twig slapped my face. I had been distracted by thoughts, and the twig woke me into divine madness.

I realized in that instant that I had just been slapped by solid light. I was struck by the miracle that the light stored in seeds could feed on lifeless water, air and soil and become trees. Even at the darkest time of year, here was the presence of light and evidence of its power, literally in my face.

Standing in that thicket I felt filled with the same light that is in seeds and twigs—manifest not only in my flesh but in my wonder and my openness to what I could not understand and the peace and joy and love that filled me in that moment.

All God's gifts are given for us to share, whether we are trees or humans. Once we have light in us, we become a bearer of light that God wants us to deliver to a shadowed world. We become a seed with a calling, and with work to do. As Richard Bach said, "Here is the test to find whether your mission on Earth is finished: if you're alive, it isn't."

Madeleine L'Engle was the author of best-selling books for children and adults, including *A Wrinkle in Time*. She wrote a book entitled *Walking on Water: Reflections of Faith and Art* that is about the creative process of artists, but really it applies to anyone who has a calling from God to do any kind of work, anyone who has any kind of light to share, meaning all of us.

L'Engle says that every work comes to us and says, "'Here I am. Enflesh me. Give birth to me.' And the artist either says [like Mary], 'My soul doth magnify the Lord,' and willingly becomes the bearer of the work, or refuses."

L'Engle asks, "What would have happened to Mary (and to all the rest of us) if she had said No to the angel? She was free to do so. But she said, Yes. She was obedient, and the artist,

too, must be obedient to the command of the work. And sometimes when we listen, we are led into places we do not expect, into adventures we do not always understand.”

If we listen, sooner or later, maybe every day, we will hear an angel whisper in our heart that we have some creative or loving thing to do, something that seems impossible or risky or far beyond our capacity. It is not uncommon, according to L’Engle. She says that God is always asking us to do the impossible.

Jesus heads off into the wilderness, driven by the Spirit, completely unprepared. A shepherd hears a burning bush talk to him and returns in mortal danger to tell Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” A merchant’s son renounces his wealth and walks naked out of Assisi to minister to lepers and birds.

Mary is only the extreme of a pattern that we see in the deepest, richest spiritual lives, and in our own. What Mary shows us is that in order to be the purest, best bearer of God’s light that we can be, we need to be ready to say yes to God’s divinely mad propositions. We need to be free enough of pride to look the fool. We need to be empty enough of busyness and self-importance to let God fill us. We need to be in control enough of our intellect to tell it to sit down and listen to our intuition. We need to be free enough from the voices of social expectations and shoulds and judgment to be able to choose the unexpected, the shouldn’t, the path others will judge as ridiculous.

Is it worth it to be that foolish? Is it worth it to do the divinely mad act of creativity or kindness God has been urging you to do? Well, look around you. Look at the bearers of light in your world, and judge for yourself. Look at the beautiful forest that is this congregation that has taken God’s gifts of light and turned them into our Lord’s Acre, or our Mission Committee and Deacons Fund, or the climate change, anti-racism, Open and Affirming and Native American reparations agenda of our Fulfilling Our Vision Committee, or our beautiful music. Look at those bearers of light you know who have brought the love of Christ alive for you through their kindness or wisdom or healing touch. Look at the beautiful light that still shines out of Martha Manheim even after death.

Is it worth it to live as a bearer of light? Look at what comes of acting like lowly, foolish, wide-open Mary. Jesus comes with the power to bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly. Miracles come. Miracles of light.

Jesus said the only unforgivable sin was denying the presence and action of the Spirit. The worst thing we can do is limit the power of God to what our rational minds accept as possible. Mary restrained everything in her that might feel self-conscious or skeptical or afraid—everything in her that might say no to the Spirit moving within and through her—and so she put no limits on the gift God could give her. She magnified it.

God has love and light for you to bear now, for you to deliver to the world, for you to magnify through the lens of your life. Christ is always waiting to be born in you—you have a part of him to bear in every moment. It can happen only if you believe the truth within this ridiculous story—the truth that if you open yourself to it, as Mary did, if you let go of all in you that says no, if you say yes, you, too, may be a bearer of light and transform the world around you, even today, just as you are.

Let us pray in silence now, saying to God the words Mary said: Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Step by step we walk the path
light here and there
until the Sun comes up.