

The Fourth Sunday of Advent, 20 December 2009

Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR

The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

We are nearing the end of the waiting. Mary is about to give birth. All our waiting and preparation, of every kind, is building toward the birth, toward Emmanuel, God-with-us, coming for us. Often our preparations seem like running in endless circles. Sometimes it feels as though we are holding our breath. Is he here yet?!?

Finally the birth is upon us. Christ is almost here.

Throughout the season we have been reminding ourselves to “worship fully, spend less, give more, love all.” This fourth and last Advent Sunday is our time to reflect on the final challenge of the Advent Conspiracy. So this is the Sunday to think about Love – to think about loving everyone.

Some people refer to this Sunday as ‘Mary’s Sunday’ because this is when the church tends to focus on Jesus’ mother as she is about to give birth. In his lovely little book about the various icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archbishop Rowan Williams speaks particularly eloquently of icons of the pregnant Mary, the Mary of today’s celebration. “... with Jesus in her heart, her womb, she opens her hands to God as she sees us.” (*Ponder These Things*, p. 54) Visualize this icon, in which Mary is facing us directly, with hands in the *orans* (praying) position, open to God, and yet looking straight out at the world. The Archbishop considers this a good model of our prayer life: opening ourselves fully to God, while looking directly at the world, seeing all of its suffering and beauty, especially its need for love and care – and always with Jesus in our hearts.

Mary is here for us this Sunday as a model of that loving we are called to. She is filled with love for the child inside her, of course.

She is filled with love for her elderly cousin Elizabeth who is about to give birth to Jesus’ cousin, John the Baptist, and who has recognized that God is doing something wonderful in Mary. But she is also filled with love for all the forgotten people of the world as we hear in the Magnificat, her great song, which we said in place of a psalm. And she is filled with love for God, who gave her this baby, who keeps his promises, who is with us always.

Mary shows us an example of ‘loving all’. Her son Jesus lives entirely in love for everyone.

During the many years I spent studying and teaching the faith traditions of the world, one thing I found to be unique in the Christian faith is how we understand the Incarnation in the context of love. Other religions talk of the love of God; others even have divine figures who take on human form in order to interact with people and rescue them from various evil forces. But our tradition does not say that what is most real in us is the same as God, while at the same time saying that everything else in us is an illusion to be discarded. In our tradition, God himself takes on flesh to become as we are, fully, thus validating all that we are and assuring us that what we are is utterly ‘love-able’, that is, both able to love and able to be loved. Incarnation is a

consummate expression of God's love for us. God is in Mary, being formed as a human being with all the pain and difficulty that entails, because of overwhelming love for us which generates a desire to be with us in every possible way. God is not a simple, distant being to be approached with trepidation. God is complex, active, eternally moving with love, love which expresses itself in the activity within the Trinity and overflows upon humanity in the creation and incarnation, love which is growing in Mary's womb, ready to be born into the world.

With Mary as our model, we are reminded that God's love is alive inside each of us, ready to burst out to bless the world. But what does this look like – today, in 21st century Oregon?

I believe that much of what we all customarily do at this time of year can be an expression of that outpouring of love, if we choose to make it so.

I imagine your mailboxes and email inboxes are as full as mine of solicitations for end-year gifts. We know that this is a key time of year for charitable fund raising and that many organizations count on this time to balance their budgets. One can respond simply as a way of maximizing tax deductions. But it can be seen and done as an outpouring of love, in response to God's love for us seen in the birth at Bethlehem. Sending checks, clicking donation boxes in the name of the God who is love, showering love on endangered animals, starving refugees, homeless pets, disappearing natural wonders, churches in need, and so many others can be one part of loving all.

Shopping and wrapping all those gifts can be an expensive and self-centered frenzy. Or it can be done and seen as a genuine expression of love for each person – and done with the courtesy and generosity that express love to each other shopper and store clerk, each person who crosses our path in parking lot or freeway.

Inviting even the relatives you don't really like to share in the celebration can be an annoying accession to social custom, or an expression of genuine love and concern, showing an intention to learn to love even those we don't yet like.

All the decorating can be done in terms of measuring up to some standard of the neighborhood or the family, an anxious effort to avoid criticism, perhaps to surpass someone else – or it can be undertaken as a way to bring joy and pleasure to others, to delight the eye and please the heart, an expression in evergreen and lights of our love for all.

The parties can be social obligations that involve too much money and ostentation. Or they can be genuine opportunities to draw closer to people we may or may not already know well, to appreciate each one individually and intentionally.

One can make a wide path around the Salvation Army bell ringer, perhaps muttering in annoyance. Or one can keep dollar bills in a coat pocket, so as to be able to offer something each time, with a smile and a

Christmas greeting. Even without money one can greet the ringer as someone loved by God, someone we also wish to love.

There is almost nothing that cannot be an expression of the love of God flowing through us.

Last week Deacon Mimi explored the third admonition, ‘Give more’ and helped us to think about the challenge presented by people asking us for help on street-corners or freeway off-ramps, or even in the church office. With story and example she reminded us that Jesus is reliably present in every needy person we encounter, but that choosing whether and what to give is a genuinely complex question. This is something that all of us encounter, and most of us have seriously wrestled with. Now we are invited into an email conversation about our own thoughts and actions.

“Love all” – that is what we know to be the bottom line of our exploration. Deciding about giving money – or granola bars - or a greeting - is a matter of the specific individual and circumstance. What is always true is that we are called to respond to the asking person – to every person – with love. Not scorn, not anger, not cruelty, not indifference – love. The challenge comes when we have accepted the command to love and must discover how that love is to be lived out in each situation. It is good that we are going to have further conversation about this, because in all things our thoughts are enhanced by exchange with other faithful people.

Love all. In addition to the Lord’s prayer, the one text that should be part of every day for us, to keep us in the life we are called to is Jesus’ Summary of the Law: “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” “Love all” is the shortest possible way of saying this. We are called to love our neighbor – who is our neighbor? Everyone – whether we have met them or not, whether they annoy us or please us, whether they love us or hate us. This is a serious challenge. I imagine that all of us will fall short. But we remember what the Gospel continually reminds us – that we are indeed ‘love-able’. We are able to be loved; indeed we are already loved with a love that nothing can destroy. And we are able to love. We were created with this capability to go with the challenge. Love everyone.

Love all. We will conclude this service with our annual Christmas pageant. We have our full Advent worship – and then a foretaste of Christmas, of the coming we have all been waiting for. As you enjoy the pageant, think of the love that it expresses and evokes. It reminds us of the love of God poured out in the Incarnation, of the love within a family exploring the story, sharing its meaning. It calls forth our love for the Loos who are long-time members of our community and their lovely baby Mele who is our Jesus. It calls forth love for all the children in the pageant and for the community which embraces them and us. It is easier to be loving when we are filled with joy – so allow yourselves to experience the joy of the children, the story, and the favorite carols – and carry that joy with you as you go forth to love and serve everyone God puts in your path. Amen.