

“All You Need is Love”

As we gather this morning some of you may think that this is Christmas Eve. Ah, but we cannot get to Christmas Eve without going through the last Sunday of Advent. Thus this morning we are at Advent IV as our lighting of the Love candle the final Sunday candle is called.

When Advent IV falls on Christmas Eve it can be a bit disorienting. No sooner have we lighted the candle of Love and said the prayers for the Advent Wreath then we are decorating the church for Christmas Eve. After the 10:30 service the elves will come in to transform this space from the quiet and somber expectancy of Advent to the joyful celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is a quick spiritual transformation that ends Advent and quickly brings us to Christmas. Some churches can't cope with it so they cancel Advent IV/Sunday morning services so it is easier to glide into Christmas Eve.

But how can we get to Christmas without love? Honestly we can't. It was Mary's love and devotion to God that allowed her to accept the frightening and mysterious words of the angel who told her she had been selected to carry and give birth to the Son of God. In her fright she could have said, “No.” God always gives us a choice. That is part of God's love for us. She did not say “no” instead she said, “Let it be unto me according to your word.” Only the trust that love instills could have led Mary to such a powerful response.

Then there was Joseph who loved Mary, but surprised by her pregnancy was ready to dismiss her, that is to break off the engagement. He did not want to shame her by a public event, but he felt he could not marry a woman who had been unfaithful to him during their time of betrothal. However, God sent Joseph a message also through an angel that he should stick with Mary. She had not been unfaithful. In fact, the contrary was true. She had been faithful to God. Joseph accepted this revelation, because he too was a faithful man and loved God.

Then there was the love of the shepherds. The people who were abiding with their flocks by night. That is, watching out for their sheep in the fields. They were staying awake to make sure predators did not come along and carry one of the sheep off. Their watchfulness was rewarded by a heavenly visitation. The angel, was a surprising and frightening sight. Thus it said as they always do, “Do not be afraid.” Then it informed the shepherds of the wonderful thing that had happened in Bethlehem. They could not believe their ears, but they so loved God that they had to go see the marvelous thing that the angel had told them about. Their love brought them there with their sheep and they worshipped the baby. People who had never worshipped anyone but God in heaven so loved their God that they heeded the prophecy and worshipped a baby. How extraordinary.

The immeasurable love of a variety of people came together at that time to accept a pregnancy, keep a family together, and provide worship and honor for one so tiny and so unproven.

Thus it is befitting that the candle of Love should be lit on Christmas Eve. It is the love that God has for us that caused God to send the only Son into the world in the form of a baby. It is love that chose humble and faithful people Mary and Joseph to be his earthly parents. These were the people whose love for the baby was not clouded by selfishness or overweening piety. Rather they took the responsibility for raising this child as they would any other child teaching him, admonishing him, and

loving him into adulthood. Jesus took that love and his innate love of God into his adult life as he grew into his ministry.

Jesus' ministry was all about love. When he was asked what were the two greatest commandments he did not have to hesitate or parse out what he was being asked or which of the many commandments his interlocutor meant. He responded firmly, "Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself."

Love God and love each other. It seems rather straightforward but goodness gracious is it hard to put into practice every day. We have a way of getting on each other's nerves. We do things that hurt one another unintentionally and sometimes intentionally. We get tired and we get short tempered. We endure the changes and chances of life and we lose our cool. Sometimes we regret it and sometimes we don't. When our better angels are in charge we ask for forgiveness and we are also able to forgive those who hurt us.

It is because it is so hard to do that we come here each Sunday, and sometimes in between, to be comforted, which as we learned a few weeks ago means to be strengthened and fortified. We come seeking hope, peace, joy and love to take back out into a world that can be overwhelming and dangerous. As the prayer I have been using as a blessing lately says, "the world is too dangerous and too wonderful for anything but love."

Let us take our love out into the world today and every day. Let our love for God and neighbor be our touchstone; that place to which we return again and again as we grow in the love of God and each other. A love that will inspire others just as the love of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds inspires us this Advent and Christmas Eve.