

"Love Wins"
Luke 1:26-38
December 24, 2017
Fourth Sunday in Advent-Love

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

*Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.*

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, "Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

*He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom."*

Mary said to the angel, "But how? I've never slept with a man."

The angel answered,

*The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.*

"And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God."

And Mary said,

Yes, I see it all now:

I'm the Lord's child, ready to serve.

Let it be with me

just as you say.

Then the angel left her.

The fourth Sunday in Advent, the week of "Love," is the culmination of the Advent journey, the penultimate emotion of the whole shebang. God's love for the creation is never more evident than in the angel's message to Mary that, "You are beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out!" How many of us hear that coming from our mirror in the morning, or from our spouse or parent or sibling or friend or employer! We just don't run around calling each other beautiful, do we?

What does it mean to be beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out? I think the answer has to do a lot less with how we look and a whole lot more with how we *love*.

Think of the people you have known that you would describe as beautiful with God's beauty, beautiful inside and out? I remember seeing the first pictures of my twin grandchildren, fresh from being born and washed up and cuddled up in their pink and blue blankets and

pink and blue little hats. God's beauty was evident in their scrunched up little faces. Babies are not always "beautiful" in the shallow definition of the word. They are wrinkly and pockmarked, poopy and demanding. Those are generally not descriptors of "beautiful." But even though I did not birth them, even though I had not met them personally, and even though I did not know them at all, I had instant love for them. I knew that they would soon change my life in ways I could only imagine. Love wins.

Albert Clarke, in speaking of his incredible career as a British soccer player, told the interviewer, "In our daily lives, we must see that it is not happiness that makes us grateful, but the gratefulness that makes us happy." Being grateful for God's presence in our lives is like returning God's love to God, and in the mutual love between us and God, we find our hope, we find our meaning, and we find our eudaimonia—our reason for being. When love wins, there we find God. When love wins, there also is the beauty. When love wins, there gratefulness lives.

Mary's story is so incredible, isn't it? When you think about it, what does it tell you? Are we able to be at all like Mary, or is she so superhuman that we cannot possibly relate to her? I *need* to relate to her—it's important to me that I relate to her, for if I can't be with her in spirit-step, then how can I relate to Mary's Jesus? I already have enough troubling Jesus questions swirling around in my head and in my

heart—I don't need to lose connection with Mary because she's too good-too *holy* for me such that I can't relate to her.

I think of my life and I think of your lives and I think we probably all have had a time or two in those lives where God has called us to be something or to do something and we have found ourselves at an impossible crossroad of opportunity and fear. Maybe, like Mary, you were just 14 years old and you were handed a daunting calling. Perhaps you were called on to care for your brothers and sisters, because your parents were unable to care for them due to illness or death or absence.

I still think of Gus' story of how his 15-year old sister, Karin, took her younger siblings, including Gus, and stole them away by night over the closed German border in 1956. I spoke with Gus this Friday and asked his permission to tell this story again. It's a fantastic, incredible, impossible story! Gus's sister was not ready for this call, but when it came, she answered God, "Here I am, Lord. Let it be with me according to your will." She answered the call of God and helped secure freedom for herself and her siblings so that they could be reunified with their parents, who had already fled the oppression. She was 15. Love wins.

God would still have a purpose for you. Shirley Alsager called me also on Friday to inform me that she and Shirley Wick—I fondly call them "The Dancing Shirleys"—will take over from me management of

the Hospitality Hour. Granted, this calling does not have the same drama as a midnight escape over the border, but Hospitality Hour is an important ministry of this church. Fellowship is connection; connection is affirmation; affirmation is church; church is life. For many folks in our church family, Hospitality Hour is their major social event of their week. It is connection; it is affirmation; it is church; it is *life*.

It is where all people of the church can meet and talk, eat and laugh together, join in mission and in message together, and welcome newcomers to the community. Hospitality Hour is an important ministry within this church family. Thank you to Shirley and Shirley for answering this call.

Maybe you were all settled with a comfortable future and God turned your world upside down and called you to do something unfathomable, extraordinary, dangerous, and destabilizing with your life. This is what happened to me. At first, I rather resented it, to be perfectly honest with you. The *last* thing I wanted to do was to spend a fortune on seminary education, take tests and write papers. The last thing I thought I would ever do was leave law practice and courtroom judging to lead a church.

I heard God's call loud and clear, and I tentatively said a reluctant and hesitant "ok, I guess so." This was not *exactly* the enthusiastic Mary "Here I am Lord. Let it be with me according to

your will" kind-of acceptance of God's call. Not hardly. It was more of a whisper, not a bang-bang acceptance.

To be honest, I was worried about the money and about leaving my clients and partners and how I was going to justify this decision to my husband, my family, my friends, and my colleagues. But love wins, and the decision to accept the call from God changed--and saved--my life. This church has saved my life. *You have saved my life.*

But that we could all have the courage and fortitude to unequivocally choose Love, divine love, and say to our Maker, "I am yours. Let it be with me according to your will." It hardly ever works this nicely for God. But despite all our protests to the contrary,

Love wins.

We want what we want. We expect to have good return to us the good we have poured out into the world. But author Shari Barr reminds our hearts that, "Expecting life to treat you well because you are a good person is like expecting an angry bull not to charge because you are a vegetarian."

Life says to us that we can prepare all we want, but we are never really prepared for what God has in store for us. Mary may have been a devout Jewish girl; she may have said all her prayers, performed all her daily chores without complaint, minded her parents and her older siblings, and had a clean heart throughout her young life. Still, she was not prepared to bear the Christ child.

She was not prepared to endure ostracism, isolation, and ridicule, an unwed mother in a time of strict religious expectations and protocols. Perhaps she was not ready to be married, and maybe not to the much-older Joseph. She was not prepared to raise her extraordinary child and to then release him into the world. She was not prepared for what he would become. She was certainly not prepared to bury him after what he had become so unnerved the authorities that they had him killed.

Nevertheless, unprepared as she was, she leaned into the God-calling, she said "yes" when "no" might have been what her cautionary brain wanted her to say. The angry bull did not avoid charging her because she was a spiritual vegetarian. Love wins.

This Christmas, I invite you to let love win over your life. If you are angry to the core with someone, let love win the argument. Pick up the phone, make the call, sing the first note in the overture of reconciliation. This is especially important if the one you are angry with is yourself. It's time to let it go. It's time to forgive yourself. It's high time you recognized the beautiful you, the inside and out beautiful you. It's time to let love win.

It's especially important to let love win the argument with yourself, but it's *crucial* to let love win if the one with whom you are angry is God. God is waiting for *your* call, waiting for your love, waiting for you to release the endorphins of anger and resentment and

resistance. God is waiting for your heart to begin singing the love song. God wants you, invites you, *may implores you*, to let love win this one.

If you are hearing God in your head inviting you into a new you, let love win. Say "yes" to God and see how your life may be saved, how the angry bull may be put out to graze peacefully in your heart's pasture, how you might be able to crash the borders of your own oppression, how you might find new purpose, how you might actually *save your life*.

If you are feeling the urge to make war on or for your country these days, perhaps especially with members of your church family who do not share your political views or priorities, let the Advent pillars inform your heart and frame your words. Lead from peace, hope, joy, and love in all you say or do. Make sure at least one of these emotions make it into your discussions, into your prayers, and into your personal reflections.

Let love win this Christmas. Let love change you this Christmas. Let love lead you this Christmas. Love wins. Love always wins.

May It Be So