

## **Make a Holy Space for Christmas**

Acton Congregational Church (ACC)

19 December 2021

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Texts: 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Luke 1:39-55

*“In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.”*

- Luke 1:39-40

### **Prayer**

**God who came to us through the faith and  
The womb of a Jewish peasant girl,  
Give us Mary’s courage, openness and imagination  
that we too may receive the gift of Christ  
And believe in a world turned right-side-up  
By the mystery of the Incarnation.**

**In the name of the One who is and shall always be the Child of Mary, we pray.  
Amen.**

If you ask any person attending the service in a mainline Protestant church today, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, what word in the English language best defines the Christian faith, it’s very likely that the answer will be “love.” And there’s a solid biblical foundation for this theological understanding of love as the heartbeat of Christianity. The writer of the First Letter of John chose the elegant language of love to describe who God is, **“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides with them.”**<sup>1</sup> At the table of his last supper, Jesus said that love is the distinguishing trait of his followers, **“This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples – when they see the love you have for each other.”**<sup>2</sup> And in the 27 words in John 3:16, which Martin Luther called **“the gospel in miniature,”** John the evangelist affirms that at the core of the Christian faith is God’s love slipping quietly into human history, becoming enfleshed in Jesus, coming to us as a Christmas gift – **“For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”**

The whole Christian Testament makes this most amazing claim that at the heart of the heart of Christianity is not the Bible or faith or hope or peace or joy, but love and not just any kind of love, but God’s love born amongst us as a defenseless, vulnerable baby. Love in human flesh is a unique Christian idea and, without it, without God’s love fully embodied in us, joy turns into a futile pursuit of individual happiness, peace shrivels up to a vacuous religious jargon, hope devolves into optimism, faith is reduced to personal beliefs and the central message of the Bible itself grows dim and heartless.

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The New Testament, where the Christian story of love is preserved, is an open invitation to every single one of us to ponder the question of how we are going to abide in this love that came to us in the birth of Jesus. In our faith tradition, love is not a feeling or an emotion, love is a way of life, a way of imagining the world, that asks us every day how we are going to let the love that came down on Christmas change our lives from the inside out. From the very early days when the first followers of Christ began to meet regularly to worship together, Christians have been gathering to praise God for the extravagant love of Christmas and to provoke each other to allow God's love to inhabit our own bodies and our minds. The holiest, highest, the most pressing and the most relevant mission of the Church is to prepare us, enable us, and, if need be, to impel us to love and to make a sacred space in the world for the God of love to save us and to transform human hearts.

Howard Thurman, one of America's most influential Black preachers, theologians, and Christian mystics of the twentieth century, understood that as followers of the child of Mary, the greatest gift we can give each other is to encourage one another to keep our hearts completely open to the love at the heart of Christmas. In one of his meditations, Thurman said prayerfully: ***"I want to be more loving in my heart! It is often easy to have the idea in mind, the plan to be more loving. To see it with my mind and give assent to the thought of being loving—this is crystal clear. But I want to be more loving in my heart!... Thus, those who walk the way with me may find it easier to love."***<sup>3</sup>

I saw Thurman's prayer in human flesh in the life of a woman at the church I served before coming to Acton. On a Sunday morning, during coffee hour, we were chatting while the woman held her grandson in her arms. Like most 2-year-olds, the little boy was eager to practice his newly acquired walking skills and was not too happy that his grandmother was keeping him from exploring the room. We both laughed when, in a moment of toddler's exasperation, he let out a scream of frustration getting the attention of the whole fellowship hall. As we began to chat about family and children, a picture of that woman's faith and love began to emerge slowly.

The child she had been holding in her arms was not her biological grandson. He was the child of a 17-year-old girl who showed up at the church on a Sunday morning, scared and alone. Her Bible-believing parents had thrown her out when they found out that she was pregnant. The young man who fathered the child walked away with no responsibilities, no consequences, leaving her on her own. Homeless, unemployed, unpartnered, and terrified of having to care for a child by herself, the 17-year-old at the end of her rope went to church.

But she did not go to the United Church of Christ in town by chance. That congregation had a reputation. This was the church that took a very public stand in the late 1980's to include LGBTQ Christians at a time when being Open and Affirming was neither culturally popular nor theologically acceptable. The word around town was that a

registered sexual offender was welcomed as a church member after the Church Council put into place safety protocols to protect the children and youth of the church. Every Sunday, the sexual offender sat in the pews! The pregnant teenager knew the Congregational Church was rejected by the Bible churches that dotted the region for not being “Christian enough,” but it was the only faith community that had a room in the building called “the Christ Room,” a warm space for at least two homeless persons to spend the night when it was too cold outside and there were no beds available in the local shelter. She had eaten at the Thursday night community supper in the fellowship hall, and she knew the congregation had hired a professional chef not only to cook meals for the poor, which is easy, but to provide nutritious, well-balanced dinners for people who are often given the leftovers of a well-off society. She was well-aware that the church had a reputation for wanting to love more audaciously in a Christ-like manner, and for doing everything within their reach to create a holy space of love in an often-loveless world.

So, on a Sunday morning, the pregnant 17-year-old turned up at the service and a church family did what most people would be unwilling to do. They took her in no questions asked. They offered her a home in their house. They taught their biological teenage son and daughter to accept that stranger as a sister. They gave the young woman the choice to decide whether to give the baby up for adoption. She told them that she wanted to be a mother and they stood by her side, paid for the pre-natal care and all the medical bills. Time and again, the woman, who was a social worker, and her husband, a local physician, reached out to the biological grandparents in the hope that they might forgive their daughter and treasure the opportunity to hold their grandchild, but their efforts at reconciliations were rebuffed. The church couple became the child’s only grandparents. They baby-sat for the young mother when she returned to school and again when she started working. They celebrated when she became a pharmacy technician, claimed her financial independence and moved into her own home with her child. Mother and son are still part of their family to this day.

I asked the woman how she found the strength and courage to give shelter in her own house to a 17-year-old pregnant girl she hardly knew. All she said was, “***This church had been preparing me to do that and when she showed up, I knew I was ready and had to be there for that girl.***”

A wise woman, I want to say that it was the Catholic social activist Dorothy Day, said that when love is the idiom of the heart, we can create a little oasis of grace and understanding in the world. We can throw a little pebble in the pond and be confident that the ever-widening ripples of love will reach around the world.<sup>4</sup>

I have no doubt that when Mary packed up her bags, left her parents and her fiancé in Nazareth and headed “***with haste***” to Zechariah’s house for a three-month stay, she already knew Elizabeth’s reputation. Mary was only 13 or 14 years old when the Angel Gabriel visited her, bringing the word about God’s scandalous proposal that

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she become a pregnant teen. Engaged to Joseph but not married yet, Mary made a daring choice. Without any royal ancestry and living in a nowhere town that is not mentioned in any of the oracles of the Hebrew prophets, she chose to believe that she of all women could give birth to the Son of God, a new king of Israel, and be a vessel for God's love to come into the world. "**Let it be,**" Mary told Gabriel, "**Let the impossible happen in my life.**"<sup>5</sup> But when Gabriel went away, reality settled in. Mary realized that she was in a perilous situation. By all appearances, her unexpected pregnancy would make it look as though she had been unfaithful to Joseph. It dawned on her that if Joseph broke off their engagement, she could end up alone and publicly disgraced. As a young Jewish girl in a world dominated by religious men who wanted to exert full control over a woman's body, Mary was fully aware of the fate of pregnant, unwed women: death by stoning in the hands of the males from their own village.<sup>6</sup> For a moment, Mary began to question the truth in Gabriel's greeting, "**Be glad, favored one! The Lord is with you.**"<sup>7</sup> Afraid and feeling extremely vulnerable, she needed a shelter in the world, a place of acceptance, a sanctuary of solidarity, a space of generous hospitality, an ally that would support her at a critical time in her life and a loving home. Mary thought of Elizabeth. She knew Elizabeth's reputation for having a heart that spoke the language of love and for being a wise and kind woman of deep faith.<sup>8</sup> So young, pregnant, unmarried, frightened, poor, and still perplexed, Mary went to Elizabeth hoping to find an oasis of love and trusting that her older relative would welcome her with open arms to make her feel safe and with an open heart to make her feel blessed.

Jan Richardson, a United Methodist pastor and poet, captured the moment Mary arrived at Elizabeth's doorsteps in a powerful poem entitled "*A Blessing Called Sanctuary.*"

***"You hardly knew  
how hungry you were  
to be gathered in,  
to receive the welcome  
that invited you to enter  
entirely—  
nothing of you found foreign or strange,  
nothing of your life  
that you were asked  
to leave behind  
or to carry in silence  
or in shame.  
Tentative steps  
became settling in,  
leaning into the blessing  
that enfolded you,  
taking your place***

*in the circle  
that stunned you  
with its unimagined grace.*

*You began to breathe again,  
to move without fear,  
to speak with abandon  
the words you carried  
in your bones,  
that echoed in your being.*

*You learned to sing.”<sup>9</sup>*

At Elizabeth’s home, Mary was greeted with an ancient Jewish blessing, **“Blessed are you among women.”** For Christians on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Elizabeth’s words may sound as if she were trying to sing the *“Ave Maria.”* We often forget that the story of Christmas has deep Jewish roots. Elizabeth’s blessing comes straight from the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures where Yael and Judith are celebrated as **“blessed among women”** for their courage to stand up and fight for Israel’s freedom.<sup>10</sup> Mary’s older relative not only welcomed her into her home with a blessing, Elizabeth also dared to think through Scriptures and connect Mary’s bold “yes” to God to the faith, strength, and chutzpah of Jewish women of the past whose lives and miraculous pregnancies were signs that God is not done with us yet but continues to repair our world through the love and faith of simple people, strong women, like Elizabeth and Mary. Elizabeth’s open mind and heart allowed her to see what no one had seen yet that the fetus Mary carried in her womb was preparing them for the world-transforming love that was on its way.

In that sacred, welcoming, and loving shelter of acceptance in the Judean hillside, Mary’s fears and doubts gave way to a renewed sense of trust in God’s promise to use her body to bring the love story of Christmas into human history. Her pregnancy, which for a moment appeared to be a cause for shame and despair, became a source of hope and joy. Once again, young Mary remembered the reputation of the God of Scriptures who carves out holy spaces in the world to prepare people of faith to imagine the unimaginable, to believe in the impossible, and to make it a little easier for others to love and be loved.

Overjoyed and grateful for that holy oasis at Elizabeth’s home, Mary learned to sing. Her song, which we know in the church as the *“Magnificat,”* was a new song but the words, Mary took them from the mouth of another Jewish woman, Hannah - the mother of Samuel. You probably remember Hannah’s story. She, like so many women in the Bible, could not have children. So, Hannah prayed fervently for a child and when her first son was finally born, she brought Samuel to the priest Eli to serve in the Temple of God. On that day, Hannah envisioned a future when God would raise up the poor

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from the dust and break the bows of the mighty. Mary made Hannah's powerful song her own. Inspired by Hannah, Mary too imagined human history drenched in God's love and filled with Good News for the poor, the oppressed, the hungry, and for the unloved nobodies of our world. Young Mary used the ancient words of the Hebrew Scriptures, the song of another woman, to help her compose her own Advent hymn that might inspire other people of faith to say "yes" to the impossible love that came down on Christmas.

Friends, what is your most vivid memory of being in a holy space of acceptance that allowed you to love with your whole heart? When was the last time that you felt prepared to let the story of love in our Christian Scriptures inspire you to make love the idiom of your heart? When was the last time Christmas inspired you to create an oasis of love in your life for another human being? What kind of reputation would you like to have?

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent when the sounds and smells of Christmas are closer and closer, Elizabeth and Mary invite us to embrace the unique story of God's love in human flesh and make the old, familiar story our own. These two women are challenging us to create a holy space for Christmas in our lives – a place of acceptance where others may find shelter, a place of forgiveness, a place of hope, a place of peace, a place of joy, a place where God is quietly doing something miraculous to save us from a heartless religion and an indifferent world.

Before I left the church in Plymouth, an African woman with three little children showed up at the service on a Sunday morning. She was running away from a wealthy, well-connected, and abusive husband who had found out about her true sexual orientation and had mounted a legal fight to take her children away from her. Another woman in the congregation did what no one expected. She took the woman and her three children in. I asked the African woman why she came to that particular church. She told me that she was sitting in her car with the kids, unsure about what to do and, even though they were Muslims, she started looking up churches on her phone and that congregation with a reputation was the only one whose Facebook banner and website said clearly that immigrants and refugees are welcome there.

Friends, in the "Magnificat" Mary never said "Merry Christmas," she said that God was lifting up the poor and filling the hungry with good things. This is the true spirit of Christmas. This is what the Christmas story and the church prepare us to do: to love boldly and offer an oasis, a sanctuary, a holy space of hope, peace, joy and love in the world for each other.

Reflecting on the blessing of acceptance that Elizabeth offered to Mary, Jan Richardson's poem goes on and says:

***"The time will come***

***when this blessing  
will ask you to leave,  
not because it has tired of you  
but because it desires for you  
to become the sanctuary  
that you have found—  
to speak your word  
into the world,  
to tell what you have heard  
with your own ears,  
seen with your own eyes,  
known in your own heart:***

***that you are beloved,  
precious child of God,  
beautiful to behold,\*  
and you are welcome  
and more than welcome here.”<sup>11</sup>***

Friends, may the Christmas story prepare you to be a sanctuary in the world. May the love that came down on Christmas be the idiom of your heart always. May you always dare to make a holy space for Christmas in your life and keep the flame of love burning in our midst to make it easier for our church to love God’s precious children right here.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:16b.

<sup>2</sup> John 13:35 – The Message.

<sup>3</sup> Howard Thurman in Meditations on the Heart, p. 168-169.

<sup>4</sup> I am not completely certain, but I believe these are the words of the Roman Catholic social activist Dorothy Day.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 1:38.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 22:20-21.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 1:28.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 1:6.

<sup>9</sup> Jan Richardson in A Blessing Called Sanctuary, published in Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons, p. 48-49 [Kindle Edition].

<sup>10</sup> See Judges 5:24 and in the Deuterocanonical book of Judith 13:18.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Richardson in A Blessing Called Sanctuary, published in Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons, p. 48-49 [Kindle Edition].