

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

Fourth Sunday of Advent: “Love”

23 December 2018

“The Maternity of Eternity”

Fourth in a sermon series entitled “The Waiting Room”

Hebrew Scripture: Micah 5:2-5

Christian Scripture: Luke 1:39-55

During this season of Advent, we have been exploring the theme ‘The Waiting Room’. Here we have been expectant, like a mother and father, like anyone who awaits with excitement a new life. This year, our faith community celebrated the new lives borne by Logan and Heavenlight. And after all this waiting, after all this preparation, we are on the cusp of one very special new birth. We will soon celebrate Jesus’ birth! Christmas is almost here! We have now been, are now, and will be tomorrow night at our Christmas Eve service, in a sense wheeled into the maternity ward! Yet, what we are about to receive is far more than the birth of a baby. We are about to receive the birth of eternity! We are very much today celebrating the ‘maternity of eternity’. In two days, Jesus, the Christ, the *Logos*, the very Word of God, the one who shows us the path to eternal life, will be born! The gospel of John so beautifully tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1). And from Revelation, we know that Jesus

is the Alpha *and* the Omega (Revelation 21:6 and 22:13). The Christ created the world and we will reunite with Christ until eternity. The birth of Emmanuel, 'God with us', is the birth of the one who shows us the path to eternal life. We are in the waiting with John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, with Elizabeth and Zechariah. We are experiencing the 'maternity of eternity' whereby we experience God, through Jesus, and through Love, from now until all eternity.

In a strange way we have moved backward in time, almost reading the story of 'eternity's maternity' backwards. In our first sermon of the series, I suggested that we are the second Coming of Christ. That through our lives, we foster the Realm of God through the work of this church - that is the hands, feet, mouths and voice and heart of Jesus in our world. In our second sermon, we learned of the contestation between John the Baptist's movement and Jesus' movement and the fascinating mix of patience and impatience they exhibited when fostering the Realm of God. In sermon three, we again heard from John the Baptist who preached that the best way to fully absorb the love, spirit, wisdom, and joy of eternal life with God is to repent - to cease to live for oneself alone, to change directions and follow God's will. You see, we moved from the culmination of the Realm of God through us, backwards to John and Jesus' ministries, and backwards to John's preaching of repentance. And now today, we go

farther back, on this fourth and last Sunday in Advent, to the story of John the Baptist leaping for joy, *en utero*, when encountering Jesus, also *en utero*!

From Luke's story this morning, it's obvious that we have a maternity theme here. I believe Mary and Elizabeth teach us a great deal about how to demonstrate lives of genuine faith while expecting. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, Mary is clearly welcomed. Elizabeth, like most women, demonstrated gracious hospitality to her guests.

I have guests in my home and I know it is not so easy to be hospitable. It requires much forethought, preparation and effort. My guests (my son and daughter) are here this morning. I joke with my kids about how inconvenient I find it that must always be fed. I tease them and tell them that I'm on a tight budget and they must bring their own toilet paper. I have organised their dental and eye exams (thank you to Dr. Ambler). I find that Stephanie who is also celebrating Christmas with us acts as a gracious host far more naturally than I do. And this only makes sense. She is a mother.

Elizabeth no doubt also prepared for Mary's arrival and greeted her with the words, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear". Elizabeth showered Mary with affection, praise, honour, and love. No doubt, although the scriptures do not say so, food

was prepared for Mary's arrival (and the bathroom was well stocked with toilet paper).

Friends in Christ, in our narrative it is the women who best demonstrate the welcome, graciousness, hospitality, self-sacrificing preparation and expressions of affirmation. Men should really take note and learn from the fact that Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, was still mute at this time in our narrative, not saying a word, because when the angel told him he would have a son who would become a great prophet, he did not believe. Joseph, truth be told, hardly appears at all in our narrative. Though he seems absent, I am sure it is just because he was lugging luggage from the ox cart to the guest room. It is Mary and Elizabeth alone who hear, perceive, respond, obey and believe!

As we approach Christmas day, many of us will host and many of us will be hosted. I think it is important to remember that if we are to be Jesus' hands, feet, words, and wisdom in the world that we ought to be as gracious as possible in the offerings of our hospitality. How generous are we in our giving? To what degree do we put our needs above others? To those who travelled far, what are the signs they can observe that convey to them that they mean the world to us? Let us, as

brothers and sisters in Christ, show extravagant hospitality to those with whom we share this holiday season.

Before I conclude, let us turn the central protagonist of our narrative, Mary. Elizabeth's extravagant words of welcome to Mary concluded with "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished". Read what you will into that comment. But remember, Zechariah, the priest (and perhaps the Grinch of the story, at least for now), is still sitting and perhaps silently sulking in a corner overhearing all this. Upon being showered with compliments, Mary breaks into, what my Bible heading states is song. Now, to be honest, I somehow doubt this. This could not have been like the Sound of Music when after some dialogue a musical number erupts. Nonetheless, the lyrics of the song are incredibly beautiful. What I hear from Mary's song is her humility and her desire for those who are most marginalised in society to be justified, comforted, healed, and to have enough to meet their daily needs.

In the beginning of Mary's song, she acknowledged what is referred to as her 'humble state' (Luke 1:48). She called herself a 'servant'. From this, we know Mary was aware that she was at the bottom of the bottom of the socio-economic-political-and theological totem pole. First, she was a politically oppressed Jew under a brutal

Roman military occupation. Second, she was female with few freedoms or rights within an extremely rigid patriarchy. Third, she was young, very young, and therefore not even advanced age provided her some of the respect women earned. Fourth, she knew that she likely would have been stoned to death or divorced and left destitute were it not that Joseph did not abandon her and what was considered to be an illegitimate child. Mary understood that ‘the last shall be first’.

After expressing thanksgiving for the blessings of her life (Luke 1:49), In her song, Mary spoke of what?

1. God’s humbling of those who think too much of themselves (Luke 1:51)
2. God bringing rulers being brought down (Luke 1:52)
3. God filling the hungry with food (Luke 1:53a)
4. And sending the rich away empty handed (Luke 1:53b)

Wow! As we approach Christmas, who would have thought that Mary, a first century young teenage woman, would speak truth to power and even sound like a so-called ‘liberal’ scolding the arrogant, defying bully autocrats, feeding the hungry and denouncing those who have hoarded everything for themselves?

As we look upon our southern border, to Washington, D.C. during this government shutdown, at our community, and our own families, let us learn from those who perhaps best understand God: women. Let us learn from those who often best know God: women who carry and

nurture children. For more often than not, women know how God desires all his children ought to be treated.

This was the Word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, the people of God responded, “Amen!”