



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

December 19 2021: Sermon “Implacable Love” by Rev. David Jones

Last Sunday I magnanimously invited Pastor Nancy Sykes to preach about John the Baptist and his “brood of vipers” conveniently scheduled for the same day we lit the candle of Joy. And now here I am getting stuck with our passage from Luke this morning. Instead of the charming, eccentric Baptist condemning us all as sinners, I have to speak about this painfully sweet image of Elizabeth and Elizabeth’s unborn child leaping for joy at the sight of the young and radiant mother Mary. And somehow I have to connect this to the theme of love.

But I suppose there *are* many expressions of love in this passage. Mary has just consented to become the mother of the Son of God. The story tells us that Mary, after consenting, immediately set out for her cousin Elizabeth’s home. Maybe she did this because Elizabeth, who six months earlier became pregnant herself, would especially understand the news Mary was bringing and could be trusted to shelter Mary while she figured out what to do next. In any case, as soon as Mary arrives, Elizabeth’s child leaps for joy within her. And Mary, in a safe place, accompanied by another expecting mother and affirmed in her great task, begins to sing a song of her own.

It may be difficult for us to reconcile this joyful, exciting moment with the image on our bulletin this morning. Early in the week, looking forward to our scripture today, I began looking at images of a pregnant Mary, at paintings of this moment with her cousin Elizabeth. Many of them radiate the warmth and gentleness of their greeting. But Mary’s song, called the Magnificat, is not only full of praise. It has been described as “the great New Testament song of liberation—personal and social, moral and economic,” and has been considered “a revolutionary document of intense conflict” (Jane D. Schaberg and Sharon H. Ringe via Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay). And sure enough, images of Mary that stress the revolutionary character of her words also exist, depicting Mary with her fist raised and a serpent being crushed under her feet. Finally I came upon the image we’ve included today.

At first I was not convinced it could work. Mary and Jesus both look so stoic. It’s not very warm. And Mary is seated, mouth closed; she is not up singing, she is not humbly confiding in her cousin. But the more I looked into Mary’s face, the more I studied the way she is seated on a throne, arms wide, protecting the child within; the more I looked at the child, the cross and resurrection already present, I began to understand this whole moment differently.

It is not only that the Son of God is to be born as a baby to Mary. It is not simply a blessing on one person or one family. In her song, we see that Mary understands her task as much more than this, that her vision of the future reaches further than nine months, and further even than Jesus’ childhood. Her song is not only about the relationship between a mother and her child, or between a woman of faith and God. And Mary is not naive. She has pondered this pregnancy, she has sought out shelter and support. Mary has chosen a pregnancy and a birth and a child and a person that will enter into a great conflict with this world. She knows that a terrible fate awaits her child, and therefore awaits her too, as his mother. An awful journey is ahead.

This image, then—Mary’s expression, the child’s, the position of the mother’s arms to the son’s body taking shape within her, the throne she has taken—is about *power*. Specifically it is about the reversal of

power: those on the throne now, violent men, will be supplanted in this world by the mother and the child of true love. This image is about a greater strength than the world yet knows. Love is many things, but in this passage—in the song of Mary—Love is the greatest power of all. And those who consent to it, who devote themselves to it, who nurture and guard it, are neither humble nor proud; rather they become confident beyond measure.

What can so easily get lost in this holiday season cannot get lost today, thanks to the Magnificat. Mary's love is the love of a prophet-mother; it is the love of the lowly for the God who will lift them up. Mary's love—the one she carries in her—is the immovable, invincible love that actually *is* God. And her song—as with the image on the front of our bulletin—shows that love is not only a vulnerable child, love is also the implacable power that will reverse the order of the world, by enthroning love itself.

Many of us say that Jesus is the Son of God, but let us also say that God is the child of a young woman who is poor, of a young woman who identifies herself with all who are lowly in this world now. God is the child of a young woman standing in solidarity with all who suffer. When God's will is level ground; when God's will is every valley of hunger filled in, and every prideful hill of the powerful brought low; when God's will is to satisfy all who hunger now and to send those who are already full away empty—then a poor young woman like Mary is the only mother who God can choose. And it is the only mother who can choose God.

Because it is not the nature of unconditional love—not the nature of God—to set limits or boundaries on who can come to a wedding or take a seat at the table. It is not in the nature of unconditional and limitless love to see only how a few live behind palace walls. It is not in the nature of this Creation of diversity and untold variety to exclude Samaritans or young women or people of other nations from the praise of God and the celebration of God's presence in every created thing. It is not in the nature of the prodigal parent to condemn a lost child, or in the nature of the shepherd to turn its back on a wayward sheep. Rather it is the nature of the Holy One, of the One Most High, of the Creator of an infinite universe—and of the child in search of Mary—to seek only dignity for all, regardless of the choices we each might make, regardless of our mistakes or failings. The strict and judgmental rulers of God's human children cannot fulfill God's dreams, they can only narrow them until they are stolen and forgotten. So God must find a mother among us who longs for the world to change, who prays for the fall of the rulers and the exploiters, who does not judge herself or her family or her community for being subjected to a foreign power or for losing standing in a rapidly changing economy. God must find a poor woman who hopes, who has the peace of faith, who is capable of joy in the midst of awful conditions, and who would bear a child for the whole world, not only for herself.

What is salvation to such a mother living unmarried on the margins of society and living in poverty—how can her soul magnify the Lord who favors her so—except to bear the love that will reverse our society, that will lift all those who hunger and thirst now, that will lift all those who are discriminated against, lift all those who are ostracized or brushed aside, overlooked or forgotten, and that will bring down those who are full now, and send those who exploit others away with nothing. This is the dangerous, revolutionary salvation inside Mary, a poor, pregnant woman, who will bring God into human history knowing love is on her side and on the side of Elizabeth and her child, on the side of all who are low or made to feel low. Mary does not just carry the crying infant in a manger, with small, curled hands; she bears a person that will follow love to the ends of the earth—for her, for himself, for every one of us.

This is no ordinary love, I'm afraid. It may strike us as burdensome as John the Baptist's accusations last week. But the good news is that Mary is sharing this song with us. She is inviting us to join her in carrying this love. We are being invited to witness this love—the love that is God—and to share in caring for him and raising him. We are invited to join this child, who will become a man, and to follow him to the wilderness, to the countryside, to the city; to swell and grow in number until we become as strong as this child and his mother, as strong as love, even as strong as God. Until the children of poor women are no longer crucified; until a mother's love is no longer crucified; until God is no longer crucified, we are invited to follow this child.

Like Mary once did, we may have our doubts about what is right and what is wrong. Like Mary once was, we may be afraid or unsure, and seek protection and security with those we trust. But ultimately we must each become like the Mary who sings to us today, who sits implacably on a new throne. We must become as strong as the certainty that God is with us—as strong as love.

Alleluia and amen.