

December 19, 2021
“Love Actually”
Luke 1:39-55
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

“Love is as love does. Love is an act of will – namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.”

That’s from our bulletin cover this morning, from bell hooks, the revolutionary Black feminist author, scholar and activist who died this past week, from her book, *All About Love*. Thanks be to God for a life, and a life’s work, dedicated to confronting and dismantling intersectional systems of oppression and domination – imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchy. LOVE in the cause of individual and collective liberation and justice.

Love is our focus this week, our four-week Advent journey having taken us from HOPE to PEACE to JOY and now to LOVE – on the threshold of Christmas and our celebration of divine Love incarnate.

This week the liturgy rightly turns our attention to Mary, the unexpected mother of Jesus. And this week turns our attention to Mary’s exuberant song of praise, the so-called “Magnificat,” echoing Hannah’s song over the miraculous birth of her son, Samuel.

Mary likewise exults in God’s blessing and lifts up God’s vision of justice and peace – a vision rooted in an everlasting covenant of love and faithfulness, “the promise (God) made,” as verse 55 describes it, “to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

bell hooks also wrote, in *All About Love*, that “A generous heart is always open, always ready to receive our going and coming. In the midst of such love we need never fear abandonment. This is the most precious gift true love offers – the experience of knowing we always belong.”

That is true love, God’s love, God’s covenant, God’s promise, that we will always belong.

Our scripture readings this morning come right after the so-called Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel visits the virgin Mary and tells her that she will conceive a son – and not just any son, of course. One who will continue God's covenant and fulfill God's kin-dom.

"How can this be," she asks, "since I am virgin?" A reasonable question, to be sure, to which the angel responds with mystery and intrigue, describing a holy interchange between divine and human.

"For nothing will be impossible with God," the angel reminds her. And at that, she CHOOSES love: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Now given the angel's pronouncement, you could argue that Mary does not actually have a choice. But hear in her response her clear consent: "Here am I . . . let it be with me according to your word." God chooses her, yes, but Mary CHOOSES to accept and embrace this role, this responsibility. It is her choice to make.

As Katherine Norris writes, Mary "does not lose her voice but finds it. Like any of the prophets, she asserts herself before God, saying 'Here am I.' There is no arrogance, however, only holy fear and wonder. Mary proceeds – as we must do in life – making her commitment without knowing much about what it will entail or where it will lead."

In choosing to become the mother of Jesus, Mary is faithfully committing herself to participate in the ongoing unfolding of God's covenant of love and the fulfillment of God's kin-dom of love.

And this is exactly what her relative, Elizabeth, celebrates in their meeting. Following her encounter with the angel, our reading this morning picks up with Mary's visit to Elizabeth, the soon-to-be mother of John the baptizer.

Her child "leaped in her womb," we're told, upon hearing Mary's greeting. And then filled with the Spirit, Elizabeth proclaims what Mary has not yet told her, and what is not yet visible to the naked eye: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of

your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?"

She who would have been disgraced under the circumstances, and within her social and cultural context, is instead blessed. Her shame is turned to joy, and Elizabeth goes on to bless Mary, ABOVE ALL, for "believing that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Mary is a young, poor, now pregnant, unwed Jewish woman living under the political, social and economic oppression of Roman occupation. We can't forget that. And within that context, Mary's choice is rooted in her enduring belief in the good news of God's covenant and in God's kin-dom to come. ANOTHER WAY than the way she knows all too well.

She is claiming her GOD-GIVEN power and agency, and choosing to commit her ordinary voice and her vulnerable, "lowly" life to an extraordinary cause. To a divine cause much bigger than herself.

And it's important, here, to note the contrast between Mary and Elizabeth's husband, Zechariah, the priest. You may recall a couple of weeks ago Zechariah's response to a visit from the same angel, Gabriel. Sent to tell him that Elizabeth, previously barren in her advanced age, would bear a son.

He's skeptical and insists on proof, and is promptly punished – though gracefully – for his doubt: "But now," the angel says, "because you DID NOT believe my words, which WILL BE fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable speak, until the day these things occur."

It's true that Mary also raises question upon hearing the angel's unbelievable news, again, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" But her question is marked by curiosity – more faith seeking a deeper understanding than Zechariah's doubt seeking proof.

Judith Jones writes that "Zechariah asked for proof that the angel's word was true. Mary asked for an explanation of what was going to happen to her, and then gave her

willing consent. Zechariah the religious professional doubted God, but Mary the peasant girl believed, and her trust in God's word opened the door for God to bless her and to bless the whole world through her. Elizabeth celebrates Mary's willingness to say 'yes' to God."

In response to Elizabeth's blessing of Mary, honoring her belief, Steve Garnaas-Holmes writes:

"This time of year we're told to "believe."
But what does that mean?
Judging from the movies to believe
means to believe in magic, or Santa, or romance,
to be optimistically wishful and naïve.
In many Christian circles to believe means
to think, as in believing certain doctrines are true.
But the word 'believe' comes from old English,
rooted in German, *belieben*—to love.
In scripture to believe means to give your heart:
to lovingly entrust yourself, not to an idea but to a person.

Blessed is she who trusts God, and the power of love.
Blessed is she who trusts
that God's promise will be fulfilled in her.
Blessed is she who trusts
that her love is more powerful than empires.
Blessed is she who entrusts herself
to the One who births her,
and who is in her, and whom she births.
Blessed is she who trusts her worthiness,
that her calling is sure and her gift is needed
and her voice carries weight.
Blessed is she who gives herself over
to the divine work of bearing love into the world."

God chooses Mary, yes, and Mary chooses to give "herself over to the divine work of bearing love into the world." And with her choice comes the kind of commitment that bell hooks describes as indicative of TRUE love. Love marked by both intention AND action.

IN MARY'S CASE, the literal commitment of pregnancy and eventually parenthood of the revolutionary rebel Jesus. Divine Love incarnate.

AND IN OUR CASE, as Advent turns toward Christmas, Mary's miraculous, mysterious pregnancy becomes metaphor for the invitation that is ALWAYS before us: to believe the good news and give OURselves over, like Mary, to the divine work of bearing love into the world. To the ongoing "labor of love" we also talked about a couple of weeks ago.

To CHOOSE love. TRUE love. Love ACTUALLY. Love in action. Love "more powerful than empires," that confronts oppression and domination, and empowers liberation and justice.

Love that fulfills God's everlasting covenant and desire for God's people, as Mary's song so powerfully proclaims – again echoing Hannah, echoing the prophets before her and anticipating her own child Jesus: "(God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; (God) has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

"Love is as love does. . . . We do not have to love. We choose to love." The divine work of bearing love into the world is ours to do.

Friends, may we, like Mary, believe and give our hearts and lives to it. God only knows what blessings may come.

May it be so.