

Luke 1:26-38: 44-56
Surrender to Love
Advent 4 - December 22, 2019
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The Bible is often precise on locating an incident in historical context. For instance, the call of Isaiah occurred “in the year King Uzziah died” and the Word of the Lord “came to Jeremiah in the days of King Josiah ... in the thirteenth year of his reign.” Luke begins his gospel telling us it’s set in the days of King Herod of Judaea and that later “in those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” It’s all a biblical way of saying all these events have a specific historical context and that matters to understanding the story that follows.

Which is why I begin by saying in the year of our Lord, January 20, 2001, on the day George W. Bush was inaugurated President of the United States, and the Washington Nationals were known as the Montreal Expos, Stephen Strasburg was 13 and Anthony Rendon just 11, I preached my first sermon at Saint Mark. It was on love, focusing on Saint Paul’s insistence that without love nothing really matters. Without love, all the movements of life go nowhere and sound much like a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. It doesn’t matter how religious you are, how smart you are or how eloquent your speech, including your sermons. If you have not love it’s all pointless. Because in the end, love is all that matters joined with faith and hope.

Nine months later the world experienced the horror on September 11. We held one another together in this sanctuary reciting Psalms, sharing our grief in solidarity with all who mourn, singing our hymns and praying as one community.

Ten years later in the year of our Lord 2011, Barak Obama was President. Again, I preached on love. Though I don’t recall every word of that sermon, I’m confident I said pretty much the same thing: without love, nothing really matters. I spoke personally about the vanity of accomplishments, medals and accolades if unaccompanied by love because, as Saint John said, if we say that we love God and yet refuse to love the one who is suffering, we actually know nothing about love. Our scriptures are unmistakably clear about this one thing: love is what matters in the beginning, middle and end of our days. On that day we probably sang the song I sang when my hair was long and my jeans raggedy, “they will know we are Christians by our love.”

Sadly, Christians are now known for many things that obscure the single thing that we are called to be known for: love. Not the sentimental kind, but the love displayed by Jesus welcoming the outcasts, eating with sinners, healing the sick

and tending the wounded, welcoming the stranger, fully displaying the love of God. It's Jesus' love for the lost, the lonely, the left out and abandoned by which Christians are to be known. Yet, today many Christians are known for the opposite of love. I'm confident I said something like that in the year of our Lord 2011.

Here we are today, on the 4th Sunday of Advent in the year of our Lord 2019 when Donald Trump is the Impeached President and the nation is in turmoil because of his incendiary speech and immoral behavior. Nearly twenty years we've been together as pastor-congregation. We've known much **conviviality** and much sorrow. Since 9/11, we've experienced Afghanistan, Syria, and Virginia Tech, and Charleston, and Sandy Hook and Charlottesville and Parkland and Los Vegas and Orlando and so much more that rends our hearts and especially rends the heart of God. The country has been at war my entire pastorate.

Once more, on this occasion I want to speak about love, because, again, without love nothing else really matters in the end. If you are wondering about justice, Dr. King taught us, as did Israel's prophets of old, that justice is a form of love made visible in public. To neglect one is to abandon the other.

The gospel for today, is the familiar story of the teenage Jewish girl who became the mother of God-in-flesh. It's a love story of the most astonishing kind. Like all love, it requires that our imaginations be alert, attentive to the wonder implicit in this extraordinary event when the angel comes to the unsuspecting Mary to deliver news that will bridge the divide between humanity and our God.

This God, who hovers over chaos, who brings light into darkness and calls all creation into being, is in love with us and for us, desires to be with us forever. This love is the beating heart of God at the heart of Christian faith.

Mary trembling on the threshold of love surrenders, opening herself in vulnerable acceptance, to bear in her body, love for us all in Jesus. This is love so astonishing, so radical, so intimate that one might blush with wonder. We forget the tenderness by which God chose to be one with us. We forget the vulnerability of both God and Mary in this embrace of love. From Mary's womb, will come the love by which we measure all loves, in whose death and resurrection, we find a home for our hearts and a path for our lives.

The great blues guitarist and singer BB King once joined U2 on the song, When Love Comes to Town. While the guitar wails Bono testifies of the joy in his life when loves comes to town and he jumps on that train.

The is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Love has indeed come to town, every town, every city, every hill, every valley, every mountain, every border. There is no place where love has not come.

"I am your servant," says Mary, "Be it unto me according to your word." And so becomes the exemplar for the rest of us. But that's not all.

Mary's joyful outburst is a remarkable display of prayer and politics seamlessly integrated, bound together in faithful practice.

She describes what **love as justice** looks like when she rises up with joy, recalling the song of Hannah from the book of Samuel, singing her praises to God her savior who has brought down the powerful from their thrones

scattered the proud,
sent the rich away empty
and lifted up the lowly.

The hungry shall be fed

and the poor shall receive mercy
according to the promise now fulfilled in the One
whose coming rule
threatens all rulers and shall never end.

Be it unto me according to your word, says Mary, as she surrenders to the love that transforms everything.

And you can do the same today:

Open your heart.

Surrender to God's love for you.

Nothing says Christmas quite like surrender.

So in the year of our Lord on December 22, 2019 after 32 years of pastoring and preaching, the Washington Nationals are World Series Champions, Stephen Strasburg is most valuable player and Anthony Rendon is an Angel — I can honestly say there is really only one sermon: God is love.

For, from the fullness of this God we have all received, grace upon grace. (John [1:16](#))

Can I get an Amen?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

