12-7/8-19 Altogether Love Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 1:26-45 Advent 2

Has a birth announcement ever caught you by surprise?

On December 9th, 2007, the congregation of Payne St Paul UMC arrived in worship to an unexpected birth announcement. Timothy Edward Haines had been born on December 6,

almost two weeks before his due date. His early arrival caught PPRC and I unprepared.

We had to scramble for Sunday coverage as my maternity leave began two weeks early.

In July 2011, my best friend surprised everyone when she announced that she and her husband were expecting their third child the following February. At age 40, with children ages 12 and 7,

and all of the baby gear given away, another baby was totally unexpected.

Over 2000 years ago the people of Israel had been waiting and watching for Jesus’ arrival for generations. They acknowledged their need for a Savior. They yearned for the Promised One of God to appear. Even though God had not spoken through prophets or angelic messengers

for over 400 years, they still anticipated God’s promises to be fulfilled.

Yet the way God came to earth surprised them all.

None of them expected God to come to earth through an unknown young woman from a rural village, far away from the places and people in power and authority.

If God HAD come among the wealthy and powerful, how many people then would have believed they were not worthy to receive God’s love, because they were not part of the world’s elite? How many men and women today still believe they are not worthy to receive God’s love

because they do not believe they are welcomed in the church? They aren’t from the proper social circles or wear the right clothes. They are ashamed of their backgrounds or their present situations. They feel judged, not welcomed. Shunned, not embraced. Even those who are wealthy often do not feel welcomed, for they question if people want to know them for who they are or for what they can bring.

Wealthy or poor or middle class, how many of us have ever thought to ourselves, if they really knew me, how would they treat me then?

The good news of Christmas is that God knows us, and loves us anyway. God knows our sins and our failures, and sent his Son Jesus to forgive us and redeem us! God knows our struggles and our hopes, and calls us anyway to be a part of God’s kingdom in this world.

God’s love for all humankind is evident time and again throughout the Scriptures. God rarely calls the wealthy and powerful, if they seek to live life on their own terms. Instead, God calls the ordinary and obedient, those willing to follow God’s ways.

Consider who all is invited to be participants in the story of Jesus’ birth. A Temple priest and his wife getting on in years. A young girl from a rural village. A hardworking carpenter. Shunned shepherds. Foreigners.

Consider who all is invited to be Jesus’ followers. Fishermen and tax collectors. Women who had access to resources and women healed of demons. Sinners and outcasts. Religious leaders and children. A persecutor of the early church. You and I.

The story we celebrate at Christmas, the stories we retell leading up to Christmas, are part of God’s great love story for the world. Yet God’s love is no ordinary love. God’s love is an altogether love—deep, abundant, welcoming, sacrificial.

In our Scripture today, Mary and Elizabeth both remind us how to receive and share God’s love.

Mary was an ordinary young woman from a humble yet faithful Jewish family. Most likely she was poor, uneducated, and used to hard work around the house.

Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph, a descendent of David who worked as a humble carpenter and lived in a small town named Nazareth in the rural area of the Galilee in the oft overlooked nation of Israel.

A sudden birth announcement was not what Mary had planned. Yet the story of Christmas is not our plan. It is God’s plan. God’s work. God’s gift of love to the world.

Imagine Mary’s emotions when she is approached by the angel Gabriel: “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you!”

Scripture says that Mary was greatly troubled, thoroughly shaken, much perplexed by Gabriel’s greeting—and he had not yet even gotten to his message! Yet Mary knows enough about her faith history to know that when God’s messenger shows up, your life is about to take an unexpected turn.

Gabriel continues: “Mary, do not be afraid. You have found favor with God. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will rule Jacob’s house forever; his kingdom will never end.”

So much to absorb there in so few words. Young unwed poor ordinary faithful Mary, was going to have a baby boy. And this boy would be no ordinary son. He is the long-awaited Messiah, the son of God, the one whom God had promised long ago. He will be a king; he will be a ruler; he will be no ordinary man even though his mother is an ordinary girl.

How does Mary even begin to respond to the announcement that she has been chosen to bear the Son of God? That she will have a part in the fulfillment of the Scriptures? Shouldn’t that be someone with more power and riches, more faith and prestige, one who lives closer to Jerusalem? What will Joseph say? What will her parents say? What will the neighbors think?

I can imagine all of this and more ricocheting through Mary when she slows the angel down and asks a question. “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Mary is betrothed to Joseph, a legally binding engagement, but they are not yet married; they have not yet had sexual relations. For her to be found with child before their marriage was actually a death sentence in her society, much as we hear from the extreme Muslim societies today. If Joseph was lenient he could divorce her, and we know from the Gospel of Matthew that he considered that option, and then her and her child would be ostracized from Jewish society.

Mary knew that to accept Gabriel’s words put her life and her child’s life at risk. Unlike Zechariah who questioned the angel out of disbelief when told his wife would give birth to the forerunner to Jesus, Mary asked the question from a heart of faith, not questioning THAT it would happen but HOW it would happen.

While not giving intimate details, Gabriel tells Mary not to worry, for the same Spirit who breathed life into the heavens and the earth will be the same Spirit to breathe life into her womb without any intimacy with Joseph. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

Gabriel then goes on to encourage Mary by announcing her much older cousin Elizabeth, Zechariah’s wife, is expecting her first child. “Good news!” Gabriel says. “Did you know that your cousin Elizabeth is going to have a child in her old age? She who was once called barren is now in her sixth month. Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.”

Once again, Gabriel reassures Mary that this birth is the gift of God’s love for the world.

In humble faith and trust in God, Mary accepts her place in the story of salvation by responding to Gabriel: “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Have you had experiences in your life where you stood at the beginning of a new season

and said yes to love without knowing how it would all turn out?

- “Almost Christmas” p.72 Abingdon Press

Mary had no idea what all was to come. Joseph’s response. An unexpected trip to Bethlehem. Then Egypt. The popularity of her son as a rabbi. The scorn he would receive from other religious leaders. The cross. And only then the empty tomb.

As Pastor Mike Slaughter reminds us,

..It is easy to sanitize the birth event because we approach the story of the incarnation already knowing the end. It’s kind of like missing the experience of a good book or movie because your friend already told you how it turns out. Therefore, we have to understand the Immanuel event

in the context of what Mary was experiencing at that moment.

We read the Bible through sanitized lenses because we know the ending at the beginning.

But Mary was living in the beginning without the benefit of knowing the Easter morning outcome. --p.23, p.26 Mike Slaughter “Christmas Is Not Your Birthday”

Mary said yes to receiving God’s love in her life, and allowing God to love the world through the child born of her womb.

How do we respond to God’s love in our lives? Are we willing to receive God’s gift of love for us,

the gift of Jesus, God incarnate, a gift of love and hope, of salvation and grace, of forgiveness and new life? Or do we pay lip service to such a gift, even in this Advent season, or reject outright that such a gift of love is for us?

Do we live by an almost or an altogether love?

In 1741, John Wesley, the Anglican priest who founded the Methodist movement, wrote a sermon titled “The Almost Christian.”

April Casperson, a West Ohio deacon, reflected on Wesley’s difference between an almost Christian and an altogether Christian as it is lived out as an almost love and altogether love.

She writes:

“The almost Christian, the woman or man living in almost love, this person is not bad or evil, but this person does exhibit a lack of depth. The almost Christian is characterized by outward actions, thoughts, and feelings that do not penetrate all the way to the heart.”

-“Almost Christmas” p.66 Abingdon Press

“An altogether love runs deep, all the way to our heart. Good deeds come from an altogether love not out of obligation or because they are a good idea, but because they are the natural expression of love. In other words, they are love in action. And as the Advent season and Scriptures remind us, this kind of love is risky, requiring hope and even seeming at times to be irrational.”

-“Almost Christmas” p.68 Abingdon Press

Which kind of love do we live by?

If we are honest, many times we do show an almost love to the world, for we think that an almost love is better than nothing. We respond to the question, “How are you?” with a generic “I’m fine” even when we’re not. We are careful to only post snapshots of our lives on social media that show the good times, not the hard struggles. We donate at Christmas out of a feeling of obligation rather than out of genuine compassion for another person.

An almost love is more concerned with our selves, and how we will be perceived. An almost love is when we control how much of ourselves we are willing to show and to share with others, and struggle with the ways honesty would affect our careers, our friendships, even our love lives.

Sadly, even in the church, among the community of the faithful, we often live by an almost love. We limit what we share so that we still fit in, we pause before we say or do something that will make others think less of us, we don’t share the real struggles that all of us face on a daily basis.

God loves us, however, with an altogether love.

And in response to God’s altogether love, we are called to altogether love in our loves. To risk loving God, loving others, loving our community, loving our world. To risk loving deeply when others want us to love superficially. To love from the depths of our hearts and souls, because we desire others to find the same hope, love, peace and joy that we have found in Jesus.

An altogether love experiences the holy mystery of being redeemed and freed for new life through faith in Jesus, and responding to such new life through our love for others. An altogether love is less concerned about how we will be perceived or what we will receive

and more concerned with living in faithful obedience to God’s ways as our ways.

Mary lived an altogether love when she said yes to the angel Gabriel. She risked saying yes to Jesus’ love with her trust and faithfulness. And literally, her life. “Let it be,” she replied.

Mary’s cousin Elizabeth lived by altogether love when she welcomed Mary’s visit with arms of welcome and a heart of joy. Judith Jones says:

.. By greeting Mary with honor, Elizabeth overturns social expectations.

..Instead of shaming Mary, she welcomes, blesses, and celebrates her, treating her as more honorable than herself. Thus the pregnancy that might have brought Mary shame brings joy and honor instead.

When Elizabeth welcomes Mary, she practices the same kind of inclusive love that Jesus will show to prostitutes and sinners. She sees beyond the shamefulness of Mary’s situation

to the reality of God’s love at work even among those whom society rejects and excludes.

-Judith Jones 12-20-15 workingpreacher.org

When Elizabeth greeted Mary, the child she carried leapt for joy. When Elizabeth greeted Mary, she proclaimed in a loud voice a blessing on Mary and the child Mary carried. “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

How often do we welcome those around us—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, strangers, brothers and sisters in Christ—how often do we welcome them with joy and honor?

Even when love is hard, when we’ve been disappointed or hurt, are we willing to live by God’s irrational and abundant love?

Yes, God’s love is irrational. According the world, who God chooses doesn’t make sense.

According to the world, God coming to earth as a helpless baby then dying on a cross as a common criminal doesn’t make sense. God’s love is irrational. Because it reaches out to all men and women. It reaches out to each and every one of us here today.

Then this irrational love calls us forward, to love the world around us. Not out of selfish ambition or dutiful obligation, but in response to God’s great love for us.

God’s love is irrational, in who and how it calls us to love and serve. God’s love cares for the outcast and the sinner. It cares for children abandoned and abused. It cares for the refugee and for the widow. It cares for those battling addiction and feeling overwhelmed. It cares for you and your loved ones and your enemies and your neighbors. And when God’s love cares for all of those, and more, it then calls us to share our love with others. To share in ways the world says are reckless and ridiculous. To share out of generous hearts, and grateful lives.

Mother Teresa once said, It is Christmas every time you let God love others through you.

-thepastorsworkshop.com:Christmas

In closing, Rev. Casperson encourages us with these words:

In the Advent narrative, God shows up as an act of altogether love. But the humans in the stories also showed up in their own ways, moving from an almost love to an altogether, active love that proclaimed salvation to the world. Mary said yes to an unknown future; Elizabeth sheltered Mary in the face of the unknown. In our faith, God shows up as an act of love,

and our response to God’s altogether love is to show up and go out into the world with the good news of Christ.

-“Almost Christmas” p.77 Abingdon Press

This Advent season, open yourselves up to welcoming God’s altogether and abundant love for you. Then in response, share that altogether love with others. Blessed are we who believe God’s promises, trust God’s presence, and step forward in faithful response.

Let us pray.