

4th Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Tis the season for Christmas movies. If you were to walk into the Fearing household this time of year, there is a good chance that one of the following movies would be on the screen: A Christmas Story, Home Alone, Home Alone 2, Elf, Miracle on 34th Street (the original one, of course), White Christmas, National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation, and, of course, Die Hard. Yes, before any of you protest, I will use my bully pulpit here to, once again, affirm that yes, Die Hard is, indeed, a holiday movie. Just trust me. It is.

Anyways, one of my favorite Christmas movies of all time is the relatively recent classic, Love Actually. Fair warning, it is an unapologetic romantic comedy. However, instead of like most romantic comedies that focus simply on one couple and their relationship, Love Actually focuses on *10* different relationships in the weeks before Christmas. I love this movie because it does not simply speak of one generic type of love, but instead explores love through the lens of quite a few scenarios.

There's the old, washed up rocker who discovers that he loves his chubby manager of 40 years.

There's the man who is torn apart by the fact that he is head over heels in love with the woman his best friend married.

There's the mid-life writer who finds his wife cheating on him and falls in love with the maid at his cottage getaway.

There's the recent widow who, amid his grief, is trying desperately to connect with his step-son.

There's the creative director who is tempted by a woman at work as he struggles to define what love looks like for him with his wife of many years and their two children. These are but only half of the examples of the way love is explored in this Christmas movie with the all-star British cast.

Love is a complicated thing. There are few words in this language, I think, that, upon their mention, illicit so many different images for so many people. Love, actually, is a mystery that we each

discover in our own way. When I say the word “love” right now, I’m sure this room is going absolutely crazy. Perhaps you are thinking about your spouse of many decades. Perhaps you’re thinking of that marriage that fell apart. Perhaps you are thinking about your children. Or maybe your best friend. Or that one that got away. Or that girl or boy back in school that first broke your heart. Or perhaps you’re thinking of your loyal dog or cat.

Love is the source of our highest joys. Love is also, quite possibly, the cause of our greatest sorrows. Love is the muse of so many songs, so many books, so many movies, so many poems, and, to no surprise, the topic of much of scripture.

Today, we light the fourth Advent candle, the candle for love. We light this candle, as today’s candle liturgy reminds us, because “Christmas is God’s love song for us all.”¹ We light this candle because we like to save the best for last. Having already lighted the candles for hope, peace, and joy, today we “light up” love, the thing that brings it all together.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’²

Scripture reminds us that God sent Jesus Christ because God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son. This was not done to condemn the world but to save it. *That* is the love that we anticipate and share in this season of Advent. Our good friend Joseph was introduced to this love in quite the unexpected way!

Joseph had been handed some rather disconcerting news. His soon-to-be wife, Mary, was pregnant. There was only one tiny little problem: they had yet to consummate their love for one another. Logic would dictate that Joseph had reason to worry about Mary’s fidelity. However, Joseph also knew that publicly separating from her, which was completely within his legal right to do, would leave her with a life of shame and, most likely, homelessness. Therefore, he decided to split with her quietly.

Joseph must have been exhausted with the news and planning how he was going to deal with it. Therefore, he laid down for a long winter’s nap.

And then the angel came. The angel came while Joseph was dreaming because this news was too weird to deliver in the logical, practical world of wakefulness. This news had to be delivered when Joseph had surrendered control and submitted to the wild fantasies of sleep.³ In his dream, the angel told him not to worry; that “the child conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit.” Now, if I’m Joseph, I’m probably thinking that this explanation brings with it more questions than it does answers. However, it’s a dream, so we must remember that he had no control. Joseph was simply along for the ride. And perhaps this was all for the best. He just needed to be present for love’s wild roller coaster ride.

¹ This quote courtesy of *A Sanctified Art* | sanctifiedart.org

² John 3:16-17

³ With thanks to Walter Brueggemann for this concept. From *the Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann (Volume 2)*, page 21.

The angel continues. This child is coming from the Holy Spirit so, no, you're fiancée did not cheat on you. You both have been chosen to bear the Son of God into the world. He is going to save, well, everyone and everything.

Therefore, the angel gave this beloved child two names.⁴

The first name was Jesus. "Jesus" comes from the Hebrew name "Joshua" or "Yeshua" which means, literally, "YHWH saves" or "God saves." So, basically, the angel said, this child which will be born of your virgin fiancée, is to be called "saves."

The second name was Emmanuel which means "God-with-us." Not "God-way-up-there." Not "distant-God." Not "uninterested-removed-God." But "God-with-us." This child, the angel told the snoozing Joseph, would be love, actually, in its most tangible form: God!

And then Joseph awoke. One can easily imagine him rubbing his eyes, slapping his cheeks, and splashing his face with water to bring himself back to reality. However, something must have clicked within him, he must have understood that his dream *was, in fact, reality*. We know this because he did as the angel instructed, which, we can be sure, took no small amount of faith (not to mention the incredible faith that was had on Mary's part as well!).

Mary and Joseph had no small task. It was their holy calling to love one another in order that God's love would be birthed into this world. Soon, no longer will heaven be "above."⁵ Soon, as Barbara Brown Taylor says, "heaven's escalators will all be going down."⁶ Or, as Lin-Manuel Miranda has inspired me to say, the world will be turned upside down.⁷

As it would turn out, Jesus Christ came into the world in a very unlikely way. Instead of parading himself in as an already-strong military leader, he came into the world, *Love* came into the world, as a helpless baby born to two very young Middle Eastern refugees traveling under very dangerous circumstances. Instead of Love being born at New York Presbyterian, Love was born in a manger, among a bunch of stinky barn animals. Love came in the most unlikely of places. Love came to save us and his name is Jesus and Emmanuel.

In just under a week, you and I will gather again in this room to light the "Christ candle." Together, we will light the white candle in the middle to represent that Christ has been born to us, a savior, *the* Savior of all the world. Together we will be reborn as disciples of Love Incarnate. And then, a week later, we will say goodbye to the roller coaster ride that was the year 2016 and we will welcome 2017. Together, we will leave the season of Advent and welcome the season of Christmas and then Epiphany, where we will continue to explore what it means to follow this newborn Savior. But, for today at least, let us be reminded that God is love and that, because God so loved the world that he sent his only son, we are called to be relentless practitioners of love.

⁴ With additional thanks to Walter Brueggemann for his exposition on this topic from the same sermon credited previously.

⁵ A play on words from a beloved song by Sting called *When We Dance*.

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, page 24.

⁷ From *Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda - "Yorktown (The World Turned Upside Down)"

Now, I'll end by saying this. When it comes to love, let us not overcomplicate things. We know what love looks like. We have loved and we have been loved. Along the journey of loving we have all, to be sure, had our successes and our failures. But we know what love looks like and we know what it *doesn't* look like. We know what love looks like because we have a fleshly incarnation of God-with-us who is, quite literally, love itself. We don't need a holiday romantic comedy to tell us what love is. We don't need a Subaru commercial to tell us what love is. We don't need the latest self-help book or self-improvement seminar to tell us what love is.

To know what love is, we simply look at Jesus. We look at what he did and what he is doing in the world. We remember that love welcomes the stranger. We remember love feeds the hungry. We remember that love shows compassion to the sinful. We remember that love looks with kindness at those who are hurting. We remember that love is a relentless journey which is both our beginning and our end. We remember that love is not easy. We remember that love conquers all. We remember that love is what we're called to do. Period.

So, go out and love.

Love your spouse. Love your friend. Love your children. Love your parents. Love your co-workers. Love the person who has been a downright jerk to you. Love the enemy. Love the stranger. Love the gay, straight, bi, and transgender. Love the undocumented. Love the refugee. Love the sick. Love the sad. Love the broken. Love the grumpy. Love the young. Love the old. Love the body. Love the soul. Love the earth. Love your neighbor whoever the heck she or he may be. Love yourself. Love God with all your heart, soul, body and strength. Love, love, love, love, love.