

St James United Church

Message for December 21, 2025 Fourth Sunday in Advent



“A Courageous Love” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25; Malcolm Guite, “The Annunciation” (London: Canterbury Press, 2012)

“All we need is love.” Isn’t that what the Beatles sang? It’s also the theme we link to this Sunday. But what do we mean by love? As I consider this morning’s readings, I know what it isn’t. It isn’t just a feeling, or as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said as he reflected on the interplay of love and power, it isn’t sentimentality. The love at the heart of this time of year is love joined to power, love backed by strength, love that acts with courage.

Consider the two annunciations we heard, one in Matthew’s gospel and another as inspiration for Malcolm Guite’s sonnet. The poem presents what we often picture when we hear the word, annunciation. Mary visited by an angel, seemingly more open to God’s prompting than many of us. And definitely courageous when, in the text which inspired the poem, she not only holds her ground as the angel tells her what God asks of her, but says yes, despite the consequences, her pregnancy placing her at great risk, considered adultery and so according to the law, she’d at the very least be shamed, likely sent packing, quite possibly stoned to death. Her love for God is backed up with courage.

The next annunciation focuses on Joseph, who strikes me as an everyday person trying to discern the right thing to do in a difficult situation. In bible commentaries, much is said about this being an arranged marriage, but he just seems to be a man who loves his future spouse. Culturally, religiously, he could’ve called Mary out, but his instinct was to bring her the least amount of harm. It likely brought his judgement into question, and so he’d carry some of her shame. That takes courage. He does this because as Matthew tells us he was a righteous man. We assume this means pious, but then he may have been inclined to follow the law and let the elders decide Mary’s fate. Yet he didn’t. Why? Because righteous also means just. Perhaps he understood that what the law called for wasn’t right, its view of women unjust, violating the oldest Torah tradition that proclaimed women and men as created in God’s image and likeness. In that moment, he had power over Mary, but as Dr. King also said, power without love is abusive. Joseph chose justice instead.

This brings us to the heart of the Christmas story. It's about God's much needed love, but that love is centred in God's dream for us, their reign of justice and peace. We miss that if we get too sentimental, focused on a baby and his parents, when in one version of the story, that baby is born away from his parents' home because of an abuse of imperial power demanding a census be taken up where people trace their lineage; and in another his parents become refugees as they flee the homicidal rage of their ruler back home. Both scenarios highlight struggle, oppression, crisis, which is also the backdrop to Isaiah, the prophecy about Emmanuel made in a time of fear, the capital under military threat from Israel and Aram and Ahaz tempted to ask help from the Assyrian empire rather than God. He is promised help just the same. Why? Because God is with us in our crises, giving courage in our struggles, directing our love toward justice. This is the point in our Christmas stories, in one gospel shepherds are told that Jesus' birth will usher in an age of peace, and in the other he's honoured by foreigners, a sign that this peace comes by crossing traditional boundaries. Both stories orient us to the kin-dom that Jesus' coming brings to birth.

They invite us to express our love with courage as we seek that kin-dom. Matthew tells us he was born to save us from sin, but this is more than personal sin. We're talking the sin of the world where we so often separate power from love, enabling so much of what we see in our world. But they're brought together when like Mary we open our hearts to God, in prayer turning to "God-with-us," God within us. But God met in prayer invites us to be Joseph and do what's just, our love for God calling us to act out of love for others, and not just those close to us, emotionally and geographically but neighbours understood in the widest sense. We've seen examples of this recently, like a teenager at Bondi Beach using her body to shield two children from bullets; or the Minnesotans disrupting ICE agents targeting the Somali community; or two men in Cape Breton jumping in to help beached whales; or grandmothers taking turns sitting at a stall in a public square in Texas offering a listening ear to folks in crisis. Each is a response to neighbours in need, each an act of love, and each courageous. In Christ we're called to confront the world's sin by doing the same.

In a few days we celebrate Christmas, a time to reflect on God's love revealed in Jesus' birth. That birth is but the beginning of the story. That baby grew up to risk everything for us in love. All we need is love, God's love, Jesus' love, our love too, and that love needs to be courageous. Amen.