

Pastor April Manning

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Let Earth Receive Her King: **LOVE**

Luke 1: 26-38

1. God's love is faithful.
2. God's love is for all.
3. God's love is to be revealed in us.

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Good morning church. It is so good to be with you all. Whether you are joining online or here in the Worship Center, it is good to be together.

In early September of this year, I received an exciting announcement. I received news from my doctor confirming I wasn't crazy and that yes, I was with child. I was super excited and over the moon. I was nervous and excited and just racking my brain about how I would tell Dan the good news. However, Dan could tell I was overly happy about something and wouldn't leave me alone. He kept asking me what was up, going, hmm, hmm, hmm, and each time my face just felt hotter and hotter. I knew he would know so I threw a blanket over myself! Probably not the wisest idea and probably made him more suspicious. So, I threw off the blanket and left to the store without saying a word. My heart was racing as I walked through the store picking out gifts that would reveal we were having a baby – I could have just told him, but I wanted to be cute and creative – so I picked a few things, wrapped it in the car and drove back home. I gave it to him immediately and he opened it in unbelief. He was happy, I was happy. And now we are four months along.

The passage Zea read today tells about a much different pregnancy announcement. Lately, I've been thinking about the Angel Gabriel and wonder how he felt when he told Mary she was going to have a baby. In my mind, I imagine he was pretty happy and excited, just like I was, but probably not as giddy. He knew this gift would be the most miraculous and amazing gift given to us, so I can only imagine he was excited. But Mary, on the other hand, seems to not have been so excited at first, rather more troubled and confused, surprised maybe, which is quite understandable given her age and the announcement she would miraculously be with child.

It is quite easy for our attention to focus on the miraculous conception stories of both Mary and Elizabeth. It truly is amazing how Elizabeth is able to bear a son in her old age and how Mary, a virgin, will bear a son that will be called, "Son of the Most High."

Like any pregnancy, it's easy for the focus to be on the momma and the baby; it's kind of hard to ignore the growing bump as it speaks for itself and announces each time you enter a room, "I'm pregnant!" But in the midst of this narrative, we see God – working to redeem and restore creation – making all things new through the birth of his son Jesus, BECAUSE of God's great love for us.

We also see that love is not fashioned through some biological connection between a mother and a child, and love is not just about feeling or connection. Love runs much deeper than that and comes from something greater than ourselves. Love has something very much to do with faithfulness; not our own faithfulness, but rather, the never-ending faithfulness of God who loves us and in turn enables us to love.

As we've been lighting candles over the past few weeks of advent, each candle lit has represented a gift that Jesus brings to us. In Jesus, we are given gifts of hope, peace, joy, and today we'll explore the gift of God's love – the pinnacle of the gospel – and be encouraged to be a reflection, an ambassador and a bearer of that divine love to others – a love that makes all things new. If you're taking notes, now's a good time to pull up the church app sermon notes, or take out a journal and pen, because the first thing I want us to take away today from this passage is fully realizing that...

1. God's love is faithful

At the start of today's passage – Luke chapter 1 verse 26, we read, "In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent an angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee..." The first person we read about is Elizabeth, and we gather Elizabeth is in her sixth month of pregnancy.

In general, it's pretty common knowledge that the more a pregnancy progresses, the more viable the pregnancy is. In the sixth month, there's pretty much no question that the pregnancy is viable. So, when we read about Elizabeth being in her sixth month, everything seems pretty typical, and we could easily read over this without realizing that Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah, have become part of an old tradition of God miraculously doing something new out of God's faithful, abounding, love for us.

If we go back to verse 5, we are introduced to Elizabeth and her husband, Zechariah. Both were descendants from priestly lines going all the back way to Aaron, who we recall in Exodus 28:1-5, was appointed, as well as sons, "to perform the holiest of services in the tabernacle."¹ Centuries later, Zechariah is a village priest, still carrying out priestly traditions and his wife Elizabeth is a daughter of a priest. Zechariah and Elizabeth are righteous people, but they are also very old and childless.

While Zechariah is performing his semiannual priestly duty in the temple, he is visited from the Angel Gabriel, who appears in verse 26, and informs Zechariah that his prayer had been answered. His wife Elizabeth, in her old age, would bear a son named John. John would be filled with the Holy Spirit before birth, and he would be like the prophet Elijah, preaching repentance and making ready a people for the Lord. Given this background, when we read about Elizabeth being in her sixth month, we more fully realize the significance of this opening line and see that Elizabeth's pregnancy narrative echoes a miraculous Old Testament pregnancy narrative that abounds in God's faithfulness.

In Genesis 18, verses 1-14 and Genesis 21, verses 1-5, we read God visits Abraham and Sarah and tells them Sarah will conceive even in her old age. Sarah doubts, but a year later, the Lord did as promised, and Sarah conceives Isaac who establishes the nation Israel. In Elizabeth and Zechariah's case, an angel from God appears and tells Zechariah he will have a son. He too doubts, but God is faithful and the baby, John, is the one who prepares a way for the Lord.

¹ 1 NBBC, Luke 1-9, 50.

In each situation, both couples are advanced in years, doubt they will have children, yet both conceive special children. As Isaac stands at the inauguration of the nation of Israel, John stands at the inauguration of Israel's Messiah.² Both children appear at the turn of events pointing towards God's great love and faithfulness.

In Luke, that turning point comes as Mary comes into view. At first, the announcement of Mary's pregnancy echoes these prior birth narratives. An angel delivers a message that a miraculous birth is going to happen and a special baby will be born. God overcomes the childlessness of the women that threatens the promise of nationhood of Abraham and the continued fertility to preserve the lineage through Israel. But among the echoes, it becomes clear something is inherently different. In Mary's case the trinitarian trifacta is at work: God the Father is sending the Son, conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit to be born and be the Savior of the world, and the barrier of fertility that threatened the fulfillment of the story of salvation is no more.³

The good news the angel brings to Mary points to prophecies of the past and shows God's continued faithfulness to his people Israel. Verse 31 points back to the messianic expectation the prophet Isaiah revealed to King Ahaz in Isaiah Chapter 7 verse 14:

“The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

Verses 32 and 33 point back to God's revelation through the prophet Nathan to King David that the Davidic kingdom would continue forever in 2 Samuel Chapter 7, verses 12-16:

“...the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.”

In Luke, we see these prophecies are coming true and being fulfilled. The promises God made in the past are coming true through the birth of his Son, Immanuel, 'God with us,' and we see that God's love for us is faithful.

I'm not sure if Mary connected all these dots, nor Elizabeth and Zechariah, but it's likely Luke's knowledgeable readers of Old Testament Scripture most likely would have, and now we, living many years past this event and in the effects of the new covenant, do too. We get to see God's faithfulness poured out in here (Bible) page after page after page, from generation to generation, and this points us to the fact that, secondly...

2. God's love is for all.

This book certainly could have been a lot shorter. From the very beginning of the Bible, God had ample opportunity to stop loving. But God didn't.

² Ibid., 52-53.

³ Ibid., 57-58.

God didn't stop loving after Adam and Eve rebelled. God didn't stop loving when Israel rejected God as their king and asked for a human king; God didn't stop loving when Jesus was crucified; God didn't stop loving when we've lost our way or turned our backs towards him. God's love hasn't stopped. God's love is for all, for eternity.

When the angel declares in verse 28 that Mary is highly favored, and that God is with her, that proclamation is not solely for her but is meant for the entire world. Mary is an ordinary young woman. There is nothing inherently special about her. Mary doesn't come from a priestly line, like Elizabeth and Zechariah did; nor does she come from a town or area of prestige. In fact, the town "Nazareth" is not even a city of Galilee mentioned in the Old Testament. This little town of a few hundred people suddenly comes into view here in the Gospels. But God is there. God is in the midst of that little town and with that young, ordinary woman, and we start to see that God is coming to all; to be present in ordinary times, in ordinary places and with ordinary people.

No matter who we are, where we come from, or where we are at this moment, we are loved by God and invited to be part of this new family. We don't have to do anything special, be anyone special, to be God's beloved. The good news of the Gospel is that we already are God's beloved.

Paul reminds us in Romans 5:8 that "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us," so that we may be reconciled back to God. Being reconciled and restored is what the people of Israel longed for and anticipated in the arrival of a Messiah, and this is why we celebrate the inbreaking of God as a baby, as it points toward that ultimate act of love that would save the world. Although we still wait and long for the second advent, when Christ comes again, we can still experience the gifts God brings to us through Jesus. All we have to do is be open to God's faithful love and accept it. We all are welcomed to this family – to be a part of this eternal kingdom that has no end.

As we receive God's love for us, we in turn, are to live out God's love in the world, to continue the incarnational ministry here on earth. This brings us to our last point that...

3. God's love is to be revealed in us.

Around this time of year, one of my favorite traditions is attending the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service. If you haven't made plans for that night yet, I'd really encourage you to attend our service this Thursday evening at 6pm here in the Worship Center or online (just make sure you have communion elements and a candle ready). One of my favorite parts of that night is when all the candles are lit, and the room is transformed from a dark, low-lit room to a room beaming with light and warmth. One service I was at, we all at the end held up our candles and it seriously looked like the main lights turned on. It was amazing to see how altogether we created so much light in the dark; by really raising the candles high, the light shone and better revealed the faces of those around me.

As the beloved of God, this is what we are called to. We are invited, like Mary was, to bear Christ in a dark and broken world, to let the love of Christ shine forth from us, so that the world can experience the love of God. We are not invited to receive the love of Christ and

keep it to ourselves; we are invited to let the love of Christ dwell in us so richly, that it radiates among others we are with and reveals to them that they too are beloved.

While this all sounds good and warm and fuzzy, I want to be honest. There will be times when bearing Christ is hard. Bearing Christ doesn't come without cost, trials or hardship, just like bearing a child is not always easy and pleasant, although I know a lot of women who make it look that way and a lot of Christians who make it appear that bearing Christ is easy. But realistically, it can be hard. From my 18 weeks of experience, so far, I know that bearing a child is sometimes uncomfortable, tiresome, draining, exhausting, sometimes scary and a bit costly. I'm not sure what it was like for Mary, or if she had similar experiences and symptoms, but I'm sure it was difficult at times, if not physically, then emotionally and socially since Mary was not yet married to Joseph; because of this, she could have been stoned to death. Fortunately, she wasn't, but at the very least, she probably experienced some amount of societal rejection and judgment.

As we bear Christ in the world, we too may face similar things. It's not always comfortable – God uses us in many ways that take us out of our comfort zones, just think about Moses for example; it's not always energizing or happy – we still experience loss, grief, and heartache and we lament with friends, like all too recently with Joe Gause and Pastor Mike and Shelly; and it's not always easy – sometimes we are rejected by friends or family because of our beliefs or new lifestyle. But in the midst of these challenges of bearing Christ, we can look back and know that God is faithful. God is with us. God is Immanuel.

Mary was willing to be open to God's faithfulness and abounding love to bear Christ in this world so that Christ could be revealed to others. Are we willing to do the same?

When we are willing to give up ourselves -- our wants, our desires; sometimes our reputation, our social status, our pride, our control, our fear of being rejected, we allow God to fully embrace us, love us and continue molding us into his image so we can bear Christ in this world, loving God, neighbor, enemy, and ourselves⁴.

As we bear Christ in this world, may we remember God's faithfulness to us, God's love for us all, and be bringers of hope in this dark and broken world. May Mary's song of defiant hope be our anthem too. In Luke 1: verses 46-55 Mary rejoices:

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors⁵.

Let us pray.... Amen.

⁴ This based off of the greatest commandment Jesus gives in Matthew 22: 35-40. “

⁵ Luke: 1: 46-55

As we've journeyed through this Advent season, my prayer is that this Christmas we can fully open ourselves to letting God's love dwell in us richly, that we may receive and experience all of the good gifts Jesus brings to us – hope, peace joy and love – and that we may extend what we have received to others, remembering that God is with us, empowering us to live and bear Christ in this world.

Please stand to receive this benediction:

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.