

St. Paul's Congregational Church
December 24, 2017, Advent 4B
Luke 1: 26-38
Expect Love
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

All of us are enchanted by and drawn to a baby, aren't we – at the Nursery School Concert last Wednesday in the Sanctuary the congregation was full of babies and toddlers calling out to big brothers and sisters who were singing with their classes – such smiles and bright eyes on them all. It was a joy to welcome all these families to St. Paul's – so many of them were struck by the beauty of this place, the lovely windows – it was fun to see and hear them all during the concert. I freely admit I'm a real sap for babies – there's nothing like a baby's smile, baby noises as they try to sing along with the music.

We're celebrating this weekend the birth of a baby – a baby who has the potential to stop us in our tracks. A baby who will be a great joy to many – we hear the angels sing of that great joy. But, at the same time, we also know that not everyone thought his birth was good news – the shepherds were afraid. King Herod was also afraid and saw this baby's birth as a threat to his empire. Even Joseph, the man engaged to Mary, didn't easily receive this baby. Jesus was conceived in a woman who wasn't married – certainly scandalous in those days.

How outrageous this entire story is – but we know that God is indeed full of surprises. God comes to us as a baby – totally vulnerable. It's not what we would expect for the savior of the world, is it.

Mary receives stunning news from the angel that she will bear a son – and after wondering how can it be, she makes a profound faith statement: here am I, the servant of the Lord – let it be with me according to your word. She goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also pregnant. We meet two women who are having their worlds rocked by God. Imagine the conversations they are having. They are indeed blessed – both of them, and through it all, they express that profound faith that they are doing God's work. All around a baby.

You know, we don't really think about this possibility – but they have a choice – they have a choice in how they respond to this. They can refuse to receive the God who comes to them in this way. They can turn their backs. They can refuse to participate in the coming revolution. And John and Jesus certainly do bring about revolution – it continues today. Elizabeth and Mary can continue to live their lives, interrupted for sure by the pending birth of these babies – but they could have gone on, dealing with their children as the culture would have expected them to.

But they said, yes! They respond, "I don't know exactly what you are doing here, God, but I am willing to be part of what you are doing." They can enter the mystery of it all, trusting in God's love for them.

Isn't that the very question we face every day? Isn't that the same choice we're called upon to make too? Will we have the same faith to come and worship the baby, and then to follow him where he leads? Even when we have no clue as to what God has in store for us? Even when God comes to us in a most unexpected way.

We are all here to welcome and embrace the Word made flesh, to be stopped in our tracks by this baby. We are here to touch the mystery – including the mystery that the baby is also receiving us. In the birth of Jesus, because we would not come to God, God came to us.

Barbara Brown Taylor imagines God saying, "I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me – that I love you the way you are, love you enough to become one of you, and I love you to death."

God reaches down to us – God reaches down to us even before we reach up to God. We have all been made children of God by the great grace of our loving God who reaches down to us. To all of us, no matter what. How will we receive that sacred gift? How will we respond! Because we have choices too.

A little child shall lead us. Will we follow?

The mystery is this gift is best shared by telling a story: it's from a book called, "The Good News From Northhaven" written by Michael Lindval, a Presbyterian minister writing about the little town of Northhaven, Minnesota and its church. Listen for the words and will of God in this story:

Thanksgiving weekend they had a baptism. One of the elders of the church, Angus McDonald, proudly stood with his new grandson, Angus III as the baby was baptized. As is the custom in many churches, whenever a baptism occurred at the Presbyterian church in Northhaven, the pastor asks the congregation, "who stands with this child?"

Then the grandparents, perhaps an assortment of relatives, join the parents holding the baby, presenting the baby for baptism. After the service was over, after the rest of the congregation had left the church for their Thanksgiving Sunday dinners, the pastor was putting the sanctuary in order and he saw one woman had remained. He said that she was dressed in "Salvation Army style", clutching a black plastic purse. He recognized her as someone who always sat in the back pew, closest to the back door. She seemed at a loss for words. After an awkward silence, she commented on how lovely the baptism was and then, fumbling for words, she said to the pastor, "Tina has had a baby, and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn't it."

The pastor suggested that Tina should come to see him, along with her husband, and they could discuss the possibility of baptism.

The woman looked up at the pastor and said, "Tina has no husband. She was confirmed in this congregation, came to the youth group. But then she got involved with this older boy. And then she got pregnant. She is only eighteen."

The pastor awkwardly mumbled that he would bring the request before the Session – that's the Presbyterian version of our Church Council.

When the pastor presented the request to baptize Tina's baby before the session, there was some mumbling. Who was the father? The pastor said that he didn't know.

How could they be sure that Tina would be faithful to the promises she was making in the baptism? The pastor said, how could they be sure about anybody's promise. After some conversation, the baptism was approved for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

When the Fourth Sunday of Advent came, the church was full, as it always is just before Christmas. The rumored snow had not come and there was a big crowd.

They went through the service, singing the usual Advent hymns – “O Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” and so forth. Then they came to the time for the baptism. The pastor announced, “And now would those to be presented for baptism come forward.”

An elder of the church stood and read off the three-by-five card, “Tina Corey presents her son, James, for baptism.” Tina got up from where she was seated and came down to the front, holding two month old James in her arms. A blue pacifier was stuck in his mouth. The scene was just as awkward as the pastor and the elders knew it would be. Tina seemed so young, so alone. As she stood there on the Advent Sunday of Love, though, they suddenly could not help but think of another mother and another baby, so young, so long ago. Another young, unwed mother, in somewhat similarly difficult circumstances. In another place and time, Tina and Mary seemed like close sisters.

Then the pastor came to that part of the service when he asked, “And who stands with this child.” He looked out at Tina's mother, dressed in her meager way, and nodded toward her. She hesitantly and maybe a little shyly stood and moved toward her daughter and grandson.

The pastor's eyes went back to his service book to continue with the questions he always asked of the parents, and he became aware of movement within the congregation. A couple of elders of the church stood up. And other men stood with them. Then the sixth grade Sunday school teacher stood up. Then a new young couple in the church stood up. And then, before the pastor's astonished eyes, the whole church was standing, moving forward, clustered around this baby and this Madonna. Tina was crying. Her mother was gripping the altar rail as if she were clutching on the railing of a tossing ship. And little Jimmy, as the water touched his forehead, grew peaceful and calm as if he could feel this warm embrace. And the whole congregation gathered as if this were their child, as if they were all family. And together they offered their love, support, and care to this mother, to this newly welcomed child of God.

The scripture reading that morning was from 1 John: see what love the father has given us that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.

In that baptism, those ancient words became alive, became clothed in flesh – God with us. That congregation was forever joined together by baby Jimmy.

Tonight, another baby, a wonderful baby will be born into your family, into our family.

As we gather at the manger to celebrate, to welcome him, he makes us one. All of us.

Maybe you're visiting here today, new in town. Maybe you've been a member here for years. Maybe you are here today with grandparents, children, brothers, sisters. Maybe you are here today with neighbors, friends. Or maybe you are here today by yourself. Maybe you don't have much family, maybe you have lost the family you had, or perhaps your family is far away.

But do you hear today the rustling in the pews, those singing voices, those sitting around you – do you see that we are family – that the whole human family takes shape around the manger? Do you feel these strangers becoming brothers and sisters around the table? For we are all children of God! We are all joined together by that Baby. The Word became flesh and lived among us.

How will the birth of this child change your life? How will the birth of this child change your behavior? We are so drawn to a baby – to this Baby especially. And God draws us closer to Him by this Baby – let us celebrate that.

Mary and Elizabeth had a choice – we know what they did. What choice will you make? After the decorations have been put away, the cookies eaten, the daily work, school, activity routine resumed. Indeed, will we say yes as those ancient women did – here I am, Lord. Let it be with me according to your will.

God has come to us. There is no greater love, is there – and see that love that God has for us that we should be called children of God. And so we are, now and always: brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.