

Fourth Sunday in Advent, The Sunday of Love
December 20, 2020

Prelude

Lighting the Advent Wreath, the Candle of Love Don and Becky Haddox

*Hymn 133 O Come, All Ye Faithful

Prayer

God of grace,

You chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace, to be the mother of our Lord and Savior.

Though we have sinned and failed both you and our neighbors, we place ourselves before you in penitence, that you may fill us with your grace,

that with Mary, we may rejoice in your salvation, and in all things, embrace your will, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. This is our Good News. This is our peace. Alleluia! Amen.

First Reading 2 Samuel 7: 8-16

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading

Morning Message

“We are all called to be Mothers of God, for God is always waiting to be born.” These are the words of Meister Eckart, 13th century philosopher.

Theologian Nancy Rockwell says, “She enters our Decembers with an angel, gloriously winged, who honors her. The moment is spellbinding. We are entranced by the arrival of this woman, Mary, on the stage of Christmas and in the story of God.”

I’ve spent considerable time lately looking at images of Mary-paintings, sculptures, old and archived, new and freshly created in photographs, digital art, and in a gazillion pictures on Pinterest. I’ve researched the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Cloisters, the Met’s museum of medieval art. I was looking for a special sculpture I saw while visiting the Cloisters years ago. It was mounted on a wall. I was surprised by it and stood before it for a long time. Baby Jesus, plump and content, in the arms of his young, laughing mother.

There is an endless inventory of human interpretations of the central female figure of the Christian faith, the Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, the one that some like to call, “the God-bearer.”

The images come in all forms and shapes: Marys representing the world’s races and cultures. I have a collection of nativity sets. I didn’t unpack all of them this year. There were no little ones visiting this year, no one whose eyes might light up in wonder. No one, asking with their eyes, if it’s ok to touch.

But, I did unpack a few. I’m always on alert for new ones or old ones that show up in new places. One day I was browsing the Habitat for Humanity Restore and spied a tiny nativity. I recognized the small unfired clay figures, hand-painted, and distinctively Peruvian. I have a few of the same type at home. I love the simple form and the expressions on the tiny faces. They were a mix of uncertainty and mirth.

And that’s one definition of joy for me: uncertainty and mirth. Surprise. Kind of like a bride and groom on their wedding day-excited, eager, a little uncomfortable in their formal clothes, expectations high, taking a courageous step into a season, a lifetime we hope, that is largely unknown. A step that is motivated and empowered and energized by love.

Surprised by Joy: the Shape of My Early Life, is the title of C. S. Lewis’s autobiography. Lewis’s purpose in writing this book was not primarily historical. It was to identify and describe the events surrounding his accidental discovery of, and consequent search for, the phenomenon he labeled, “Joy.”

“Joy” was his best translation of the German word, *sehnsucht*, or longing, in English. This joy was so intensely good and so high up it could not be explained in words. He just knew it when it happened.

He says he was struck with what he called “stabs of joy” throughout his life. Lewis eventually discovers the true nature of joy, born of the unconditional love of God. This discovery leads to an overwhelming conversion experience from atheism to Christianity.

Lewis writes that this sense of joy is like a signpost to those lost in the woods, pointing the way, and that its appearance is not as important “when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles.”

Lewis's life was consumed by learning, though he did participate in civic endeavors. He also served in the armed forces as a young man. His mother gave him a love of reading. She taught him Latin at a young age. He was devastated by her death when he was only nine years old.

In his late teens, he shed the Christianity in which he had been raised, studied widely, and declared himself to be an atheist. But, still, there was something unresolved troubling him.

He continued his quest for joy. He called it the "inconsolable longing for the real Desirable." As a child, his joy came through reading, writing, and drawing. In his youth, he discovered Wagner's Ring Cycle and Norse mythology. As he matured, he realized that pleasure did not equate with joy, neither physical nor aesthetic, nor music, poetry, or intellectual gratification.

Lewis studied in public and private schools, eventually studying with a private teacher in preparation for Oxford. His teacher, Mr. Kirkpatrick, was an atheist, a rationalist, and a logician. Under his tutelage, Lewis read great works in their original languages.

It was a dear friend, Arthur, who urged him to read books written in English. He read the Brontes, Jane Austin, Donne, Milton, Spenser, Yeats, and others, including George MacDonald. He began to revise some of his worldviews. Ultimately, George MacDonald, the Scottish author and theologian, gave him glimpses of something other than the material world, the world that is neither seen nor felt but stirs in the human heart.

"Unde hoc mihi." Unfamiliar with that phrase? Me, too. It's Latin. I had to look it up and found this meaning: "And whence is this to me?" Or, "And why is this granted to me?"

These are the very words exclaimed by Elizabeth upon Mary's arrival at her home. Surprised by joy. As Mary was surprised, honored, and yet terrified, not quite believing that God should come to her, conceive his Son through her, bear a Savior into the world through her body and through her humility. She asks, "And why is this granted to me?"

Lewis writes, "As I was reading, two-thirds into George MacDonald's autobiography, these words leapt out: "Unde hoc mihi?" And why is this granted to me? In the depth of my intellect, all this was given to me without asking, even without consent." Just like Elizabeth. Just like Mary.

Lewis describes this moment, this epiphany, as "holiness." He was converted from atheism to belief in God. Lewis said he was the "most reluctant convert in all England." He hated authority, he had a deep need for independence, and was unsure of the one he called, "the Transcendental Interferer."

To accept the Incarnation brought God near. He wasn't so sure he wanted God all that close. But when Lewis finally came to faith, he said he submitted to divine humility, the Incarnation, Emmanuel. God with us. Born in humility and love.

I learned of Lewis's story first in the beautiful and stirring movie, "Shadowlands." Here was a man whose life had been devoted to intellectual pursuits. A bachelor of many years. If he had once believed in God, he had set that belief aside, probably a result of his mother's death.

Like many of us, Lewis may have concluded that getting close to others involved way too much risk, too much pain. But, when God pried his heart open, he found the earthly example of God's love for us: the love of another. In Lewis's case, it was Joy Davidman, an American author, whom he married. Their time together was much too short, but, for a time, Clive Staples Lewis knew and lived and celebrated love.

C.S. Lewis is often quoted in Christian circles. He was known for his prolific writing in defense of the faith, and, of course, the Narnia stories enjoyed by all ages. The words are beautiful and poignant. I looked for an appropriate quote for this day, the fourth Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Love:

Here is what I found:

"Once in our world, a stable had something in it that was bigger than our whole world."

The Last Battle (1956)

May you all find that stable this year. Merry Christmas. Amen.

*Affirmation of Faith

We trust in Jesus Christ, fully human, fully God.

Jesus proclaimed the reign of God,

preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives,

teaching by word and deed

and blessing the children, healing the sick, and building up the brokenhearted,

eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.

God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

We give you all thanks and praise, O God,

for your mercy embraces the faithful,
one generation to the next,
and your fidelity, for all ages.
You created the heavens and the earth,
and chose for yourself a covenant people,
bringing them from slavery to a land of their own.
In your servant, David, you established your rule
and promised his throne to the one
who would save your people and reign forever.
And now, the mystery kept secret for long ages
has been revealed to all the earth:
Your own Son, Jesus Christ,
is conceived by the Holy Spirit
in the womb of Mary
and emerges to claim the throne of his ancestor, David.
Though he was killed by the proud and powerful,
you have raised him up,
and with him, the humble of all the earth,
and of his reign there will be no end.
We seek to be his faithful witnesses,
bearing the gospel into the world,
caring for the sick, the weak, the rejected, the mourning, the lonely, and the lost,
and praying as he taught us saying, *Our Father...Amen.*

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

*Hymn 606 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 134 Joy to the World

*Blessing

Go now, and celebrate God's love all your days.
Give to Christ Jesus the obedience of faith,
offering yourself as the servant of the Lord
and allowing God's Word to be fulfilled in you.
And may the only wise God establish you forever.
May the mysteries of Christ be conceived within you.
And may the Holy Spirit strengthen and encircle you. Amen.

*Hymn 92 While We Are Waiting, Come verse 1

*Postlude