

***A Candle is Burning*, Music: Sandra Dean, Lyrics: James R. Murray, one verse instrumental, Second Verse Sung**

A candle is burning, a candle of love,  
A candle to point us to heaven above,  
A baby for Christmas, a wonderous birth,  
For Jesus is bringing God's love to the earth.

**Welcome**

Peace be with you, I do hope it is, and if not, I will hope that in this little time of reflection together, it will be gifted to you. Peace rests of course, deep within us, but sometimes it is hard to access. Still, you are entering a Sabbath time, a time designated specifically to lay aside the current worries and cares of your life. I am sure there are some. But for this small piece of time, we set them down.

I am Rev. Candice Bist and along with my husband Bruce Ley we serve the Shelburne Primrose Pastoral Charge in the Headwaters Region of Ontario. And this fourth week in the Advent season, we are gathered around the symbolic candle of love. We began with hope, peace, joy, and now we arrive, on the Sunday before Christmas, at love.

The Christmas story, I have always felt, it a great love story – this is one of the reasons it captivates everyone, within the church and beyond. It has all the ear marks of a great romance, the initial upset in a prospective marriage, a dangerous journey, opposition, rejection, uncertainty, twists and turns in its plot, angelic visitations, and the eventual triumph of the couple at its centre. And intertwined with this very human story, is a story of divine love and devotion, of God's love for humanity, God's care and concern. This romance between the great mysterious divine spirit and the great collective mystery that is humanity in a never-ending dance to discover how they might waltz together without stepping on one another's toes. As romances go, it's BIG.

Last week, we gathered around The Magnificat, Luke's canticle he ascribed to his heroine Mary. And today, we read the scripture that actually came before this, the scripture that is commonly called The Annunciation. This is the well-known text where the angel Gabriel arrives to talk to Mary about the child she will bear, and call, Jesus. Luke's telling of this tale is a sweet exchange, offering us a picture of Mary as a contemplative young woman, thoughtful and careful in her responses, with a lively curiosity, and a deep faith. "Nothing is impossible with God," Gabriel declares. To which Mary responds, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be according to your word."

May we all desire such steadiness of gaze and humility, and thus open ourselves up to the astonishing life that lies before us.

***Seek Ye First, the Kingdom of God, Music: Karen Lafferty, Lyrics: Karen Lafferty, Artist: Candice Bist***

Seek ye first the kingdom of God  
and God's righteousness  
and all these things shall be added unto you  
hallelu, hallelujah

Ask and it shall be given unto you  
seek and you shall find  
knock and the door shall be opened unto you  
hallelu, hallelujah

We do not live by beard alone  
but by every word  
that proceeds from the mouth of God  
hallelu, hallelujah  
hallelu, hallelujah

**Call to Worship**

Our call to worship come to us from the lyrics of a relatively new Advent hymn by Michael Jonas, which calls us to bring the many forms in which love may be found to be born within us.

***O Ancient Love, Words: Michael Jonas***

O ancient love, processing through the ages:  
O hidden love, revealed in human form:  
O promised love, the dream of seers and sages:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.

O homeless love, that dwells among the stranger:  
O lowly love, that knows the mighty's scorn:  
O hungry love, that lay within a manger:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.

O gentle love, caressing those in sorrow:  
O tender love, that comforts those forlorn:  
O hopeful love, that promises tomorrow:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.

O suffering love, that bears our human weakness:  
O boundless love, that rises with the morn:  
O mighty love, concealed in infant meekness:  
O living Love, within our hearts be born,  
O living Love, within our hearts be borne.

Pray with me.....

Loving God - as we approach the day of Christ's birth help us to throw wide the doors of our hearts in preparation. Help us to sense the importance of what happened so long ago when Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel, to remember the words of the angels and the prophets and the teachers of old, and to celebrate all the promises that you made through them. Help us to take firm hold of the meaning of all these things and to know in the depths of our being that even now you are seeking to work in us and through us to fulfill the promises you have made....

Holy One, be the light in the darkness.

As we have lit the candle of hope,  
we pray for those who feel hopeless . . .

As we have lit the candle of peace, we pray for all victims of violence . . .

As we have lit the candle of joy,  
we pray for those whose hearts are weighed down by sorrow . . .

As we have lit the candle of love,  
we pray for those who do not feel loved, for those who struggle to love others . . .

Holy One, be the light in our darkness this day,  
that we might reflect your light into the dark corners of our world.

And this particular Sunday morning, hold all those who have suffered the loss of one of their own these last days, hold them and grant them grace and comfort even in the midst of tears.  
Amen

***To A Maid Whose Name was Mary, instrumental, Music: Rusty Edwards, Arrangement: Bruce Ley***

### **Introduction to the First Scripture**

As our theme today is love, I have chosen, one last time before I leave you at the end of December, to read Paul's beautiful meditation on the subject from 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13. This is often thought of as 'the wedding' reading, and it may well have been read at your wedding, or a wedding you attended, it was certainly read at ours.

But actually, Paul here is not talking about romantic love, or eros as it is known in the original Greek. In the chapter before this reading, Paul is teaching the members of the new church in Corinth that unity and difference can be acknowledged, respected and celebrated only when love is at the centre of all we do. This is true then, and it is true now, not just in our churches but in our homes and communities. Love must be at the centre of all interactions with others. And here the word for love that is used is 'agape', which is an unconditional kind of love, the kind God has for humanity, the kind of love we are to have for one another in affectionate community.

This year, we may not be gathering in the larger way that we have in the past with our families, but we will nevertheless be more in contact with them than usual, I hope anyway. It may well help to read this passage before you gather, or talk on the phone, to remind yourself, that the love we are called to as Christians has very specific characteristics.

And note too, I have added the first phrase from 1Corinthians 14, which takes this meditation, and makes of it an intentional action. Agape has movement to it, it moves towards the other in practice, not just in thought.

### **First Scripture – 1 Corinthians 13 – 14a.**

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Pursue love.

And here is our second scripture in music and prose from the Gospel of Luke.

***To A Maid Whose Name was Mary, Music: Rusty Edwards, Lyrics: Garcia Grindal, Arrangement: Bruce Ley***

To a maid whose name was Mary,  
the angel Gabriel came.

"Fear not," the angel told her,  
"I come to bring good news,  
Good news I come to tell you,  
good news, I say, good news."

"For you are highly favored  
by God the Lord of all,  
who even now is with you.  
You are on earth most blest,  
you are most blest, most blessed,  
God chose you, you are blest!"

But Mary was most troubled  
to hear the angel's word.  
What was the angel saying?  
It troubled her to hear,  
To hear the angel's message,  
It troubled her to hear.

"Fear not, for God is with you,  
and you shall bear a child.  
His name shall be called Jesus,  
God's offspring from on high.  
And he shall reign forever,

Forever reign on high."

"How shall this be?" said Mary,  
"That I should be with child."  
The angel answered quickly,  
"The pow'r of the Most High  
will come upon you shortly,  
your child will be God's child."

As Mary heard the angel  
she wondered at his words.  
"Behold, I am your handmaid,"  
she said unto her God,  
"So be it, I am ready  
according to your Word."

### **Luke 1: 26 – 14 1a**

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>[a]</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"<sup>[b]</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born<sup>[c]</sup> will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

### **Reflection**

This really is the sweetest, and most remarkable of exchanges – "nothing is impossible with God," claims the winged creatures chatting with Mary. And in that wonderous declaration, we hear Luke, our writer, filled with the astonishment of the story he is to tell.

Always remember that this is Luke speaking to us. Luke whose writing reflects his admiration of women and the important place that women had in Jesus' ministry, Luke who loves wonder and awe and beauty, who ties Jesus – and Mary, therefore – back to the royal line of King David.

The scripture opens with 'in the sixth month', referring to the six months of pregnancy of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, whose story precedes this text. And Elizabeth, of course, is carrying the baby that will become John the Baptizer, tying both Mary and Jesus right from the beginning into the prophetic tradition.

It is mentioned several times in the text that Mary is a virgin. But this is not thought of in the biological way that we think on these matters today. Virgin was a short term for young, innocent girl. And this is an important point that Luke makes. The culture at the time, much like our time, was dominated by older men. A young, innocent woman was of little account. If someone as important as an angel of God were to descend to meet with a person, the assumption would be that he would meet with a man, and generally a man of importance – a king, a prophet. Here Luke makes his point clear. God is subversive, working outside the rules of the common culture, turning things upside down, working in a way that is new and fresh and unseen. God is found in unexpected places, and converses with those we might pass by as unimportant.

And the angel is full of rejoicing! Greeting, great tidings, God is with you. Though anyone who knows anything about angels will know that when they show up, there is going to be a major shake down, and it is not at all to be supposed that it will in fact good news. But that great creature, wings and all, is so positive, so sure of the larger picture. I am supposing divine messengers have this in common, this surety, this faith, this joy.

And the way Luke presents Mary, is interesting. In his telling of the tale, it is not likely he would suppose her to be literate. But she is intelligent, curious, respectful. 'How can this be?' she asks. She does not say it cannot be, or it is impossible. She does ridicule as did her ancestral mother Sarah so many years earlier, laughing at the ridiculousness of the matter. She simply wonders. Luke's Mary is contemplative.

You may have noticed that in so many of the paintings of this scripture, the angel arrives to find Mary reading, sometimes specifically from the book of Isaiah, reflected in her words in the Magnificat. This is a way of honouring Luke's seeing Mary as learned in her faith, mindful of her Jewish heritage, and respectful of the scriptures and their teachings.

And note that in Luke's telling of the birth of Christ, the designation of Jesus being the son of God comes at the time of conception. This is similar to Matthew's birth story. But Mark, you will remember, sees the title bestowed upon Jesus at the time of his baptism. And for writer of the gospel of John, we will see that he sees the designated title as having been assigned from the

beginning of all time. So, each writer has their story to tell, and we as the readers receive each one as a gift.

This last week, I did a little interview with the search committee so they could test their questions out, and I could give them feedback. And just for the record it was a delightful experience, their questions were excellent, and I learned much about my own ministry in responding to them. One of the questions they asked was what I was reading – a really great question to ask anyone, because what we read stays in our minds, informs our thoughts, informs our actions. In Luke’s mind, Mary was considering the scriptures of the oral tradition, books not being available to her back then. But it is worthwhile to think on what you are reading these days, what you are watching, and listening to, and viewing.

What do you think you might read during Christmastide that will enrich your Christian life, that will keep you aware and awake to the visitation of angels, to the presence of God? Perhaps you might think on this and choose something worthy of your time. For then you too, like Mary, will be in a position to be able to say to God, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

***O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go, Words: George Matheson, Music: Albert Lister, Arranger/Artist: Bruce Ley***

O Love, that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee;  
I give Thee back the life I owe,  
That in Thine ocean depths its flow  
May richer, fuller be.

O Light, that followest all my way,  
I yield my flickering torch to Thee;  
My heart restores its borrowed ray,  
That in Thy sunshine’s blaze its day  
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy, that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain  
That morn shall tearless be.



O Cross, that liftest up my head,  
I dare not ask to fly from Thee;  
I lay in dust life's glory dead,  
And from the ground there blossoms red  
Life that shall endless be.

### **Closing Comments**

This last hymn that Bruce just sang, is a great favourite of ours. O Love that Wilt not Let Me Go, was written by the much-loved Scottish minister George Matheson in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Matheson was born partially blind and was completely blind by the time he was in seminary at age eighteen. He went on to become the pastor of a large church in Edinburgh, where he wrote devotional materials much admired in his time. But I only recently discovered that this particular hymn, came to him in what I call a divine download. Music, lyrics, writing, art, these things can be laboured at, and that is all well and good. But sometimes they just arrive, fully formed on your lap, and the job of the artist then, is just to get it down on paper or canvas. And somehow those offerings having a deeper resonance.

This is how Dr. Matheson describes the writing of this hymn.

“My hymn was composed in the manse on the evening of June 6th, 1882. I was at the time alone. It was the day of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this one came like a dayspring from on high. I have never been able to gain once more the same fervor in verse.” <https://www.hymnal.net/en/hymn/h/432>

Albert Peace, who wrote the melody to the hymn, had exactly the same experience as did Matheson, recalling that after reading the lyric over carefully, he wrote the music straight off, the ink of the first note was hardly dry when he had finished the tune.

I point this out because following our theme from last week of joy and woe, it is a reminder that wonderful, beautiful things may come out of suffering. We all know this to be true. But we need to be reminded of it constantly. It is our job to be present to God, to be there to receive a song, an idea, the presence of another person, a child, perhaps.

Divine visitations are always specific. I imagine they happen much more frequently than we know, because, usually, they are not spoken about. But the mark of such an encounter is in their simpleness. I was alone. I was afraid. I was sitting reading by the fire. I was out for a walk.

Be awake for them, this Christmastide. Be surprised. At the heart of our faith, is the unexpected.

Continue to pray for our young Lukas, and the Rohner-Tensee family, that Lucas may return to his family in good health. And I ask special blessing from God, and all of you for our daughter Madelaine and her beloved Connor in their new life together as husband and wife.

And hold in your hearts all households for each has its difficulties and blessings, known and unknown. And we extend grace to them to all, with love, love, always love.

***Love Never Fails, Music/Lyrics: Candice Bist, Artists: Bruce Ley, Candice Bist***

Love never fails  
Love will see you through  
Keep the faith  
Trust and trust  
Love will see you through

With angels all around you  
There's no need to despair  
Lift your heart to the light of love  
Grace is everywhere

There's hope in every rainbow  
A promise made to us  
So leave those dark thoughts far behind  
In this you can trust.....

Love never fails  
Love will see you through  
Keep the faith  
Trust and trust  
Love will see you through

It does not matter what the grief,  
How deep your pain may seem,  
There is not wrong

That love will not redeem

Faith can take your fear  
Hope gives you a new start  
Charity will set you free  
And lift your heavy heart.

Love never fails  
Love will see you through  
Keep the faith  
Trust and trust  
And love will see you through