

ADVENT WEEK 4 | LOVE

December 20, 2020



CALL TO WORSHIP | PSALM 89:1-4, 19-29

Your love, GOD, is my song, and I'll sing it!
I'm forever telling everyone how faithful you are.
I'll never quit telling the story of your love—
how you built the cosmos
and guaranteed everything in it.
Your love has always been our lives' foundation,
your fidelity has been the roof over our world.
You once said, 'I joined forces with my chosen leader,
I pledged my word to my servant, David, saying,
'Everyone descending from you is guaranteed life;
I'll make your rule as solid and lasting as rock.'

A long time ago you spoke in a vision,
you spoke to your faithful beloved:
'I've crowned a hero,
I chose the best I could find;
I found David, my servant,
poured holy oil on his head,
And I'll keep my hand steadily on him,
yes, I'll stick with him through thick and thin.
No enemy will get the best of him,
no scoundrel will do him in.
I'll weed out all who oppose him,
I'll clean out all who hate him.
I'm with him for good and I'll love him forever;
I've set him on high—he's riding high!
I've put Ocean in his one hand, River in the other;
he'll call out, 'Oh, my Father—my God, my Rock of Salvation!'
Yes, I'm setting him apart as the First of the royal line,
High King over all of earth's kings.
I'll preserve him eternally in my love,
I'll faithfully do all I so solemnly promised.
I'll guarantee his family tree
and underwrite his rule.

Song #1

WREATH LIGHTING | PEACE

As followers of Jesus, we are ones who have gone after Jesus. We have found ourselves in need of healing and forgiveness and hope and find in Jesus, one who invites us to find all we need in life with him together. We find ourselves in a room such as this and hear again the invitation of Jesus to “Come, follow me...share a meal...and share my life.” It is this constant call to follow that we encourage one another to respond to daily. Yet at Advent, we find the table has turned. It is not us going after Jesus; it is Jesus coming to us.

While certainly longed for by some, Jesus’ intrusion into the story of humanity was missed by most and rejected by many more, as we read in John’s gospel last week. And yet, in just five days, we will wake with billions of others around the globe to celebrate Jesus’ arrival. Oh yes, many of us will only momentarily acknowledge the beginnings of this day full of gifts and festivities. Still, the reason we wake with such anticipation on Christmas morning is because Jesus has come to us! But here is the thing with the table-turning, rather than us coming to Jesus and hearing his invitation to follow, to share a meal, and to share his life, Jesus comes to us, “and the question is opened: will there be room at the inn, will we bid *him*, ‘sit and eat?’”¹

‘Will we let Jesus in?’ is the question of our fourth and final Advent poem. It is the question posed by Christina Rossetti through a dialogue between the first-person speaker (who is each of us) and an unnamed person who is clearly Christ. Packed with scriptural allusion, this common situation of hospitality towards an unexpected guest—surprising in his timing and his physical state—is transfigured with holy meaning. The question turned around, What if we are to be the host, and Christ, the guest? What if we should be the ones to make room in our lives and Christ the one we should welcome to share life with us? How might the dialogue go then, if we are truly honest?

I’ve asked Eric to read Rossetti’s poem titled, *Despised and Rejected*, which is the description of Jesus given to us by the prophet Isaiah (53:3) and attested to by John the beloved (1:10-11). Listen and read along as Christmas arrives at the doorsteps of our hearts.

Despised and Rejected | *Christina Rossetti*

My sun has set, I dwell
In darkness as a dead man out of sight;
And none remains, not one, that I should tell
To him mine evil plight
This bitter night.
I will make fast my door
That hollow friends may trouble me no more.

‘Friend, open to Me.’ – Who is this that calls?
Nay, I am deaf as are my walls:
Cease crying, for I will not hear
Thy cry of hope or fear.
Others were dear,

¹ Malcome Guite, *Waiting on the Word*, 45.

Others forsook me: what art thou indeed
That I should heed
Thy lamentable need?
Hungry should feed,
Or stranger lodge thee here?

'Friend, My feet bleed.
Open thy door to Me and comfort Me.'
I will not open, trouble me no more.
Go on they way footsore,
I will not rise and open unto thee.

'Then it is nothing to thee? Open, see
Who stands to plead with thee.
Open, lest I should pass thee by, and thou
One day entreat My Face
And howl for grace,
And I be deaf as thou art now.
Open to Me.'

Then I cried out upon him: Cease,
Leave me in peace:
Fear not that I should crave
Aught thou mayst have.
Leave me in peace, yea trouble me no more,
Lest I arise and chase thee from my door.
What, shall I not be let
Alone, that thou dost vex me yet?

But all night long that voice spake urgently:
'Open to Me.'
Still harping in mine ears:
'Rise, let Me in.'
Pleading with tears:
'Open to Me that I may come to thee.'
While the dew dropped, while the dark hours were cold:
'My Feet bleed, see My Face,
See My Hands bleed that bring thee grace,
My Heart doth bleed for thee,
Open to Me.'

So till the break of day:
Then died away
That voice, in silence as of sorrow;
Then footsteps echoing like a sigh
Passed me by,
Lingering footsteps slow to pass.
On the morrow
I saw upon the grass
Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door
The mark of blood for evermore.

In Rossetti's poem, Christ comes to us as a stranger at the door, at a time when least expected, when our hearts are closed and yet most in need, for we are people damaged and wounded by the ills of this world, by one another, by our own sin. It is at such a time and to such people that our first noel so unexpectedly sprung. The honesty and vulnerability of this poem is an antidote to "the rather...easy and mawkish [syrupy] sentimentality," as Malcolm Guite contends, "that can accrue in the build-up to Christmas [morning]. We all happily sing that we will welcome [Jesus, Savior, and humble King] into our hearts [each Advent Sunday and in between, but do so] without counting the cost or stopping to wonder whether there is anything we should be doing to prepare what Yates called 'the foul rag and bone shop of the heart' before our guest arrives."² And yet, preparing is the very work cousin John, that Baptizer, has been imploring us to do these last three weeks! Repent and hope, walk in the way of peace, find joy through and amid lament; this is how the path is made straight through our Advent season.

And yet, Rossetti's poem gives us space to admit the weariness and emptiness and doubt, the "hallow friends" who have come knocking all year long and again for many in this season has made us least hospitable. As the narrator acknowledges, "everything depends on trustworthy human relationships."³ And like the closed-hearted inhabitant of the poem, we too confess to the knocking Jesus, "Others were dear/Others forsook me." Our relationships have been strained and failed in 2020 (and before and will be again after). So to Jesus, whose arrival is near, we say, "what art thou indeed/That I should heed." How should God not fail (forsake) me too?

Buried under the genuine celebrations and often trivial jubilees of Christmastide is the knock, knock, knock of Jesus Christ coming into our world, and more so, into our pains and sorrows and doubts and wounds. But do you notice the description of this Jesus who comes asking for our hospitality? Feet bleeding, Hands bleeding, Heart bleeding, full of sorrow for us. Jesus arrives not in kingly garb or on a divine carriage but suffering. For what and whom does he suffer?

My Feet bleed, see My Face,
See My Hands bleed that bring *thee* grace,
My Heart doth bleed for *thee*,
Open to Me.

The lowly, common, suffering, and seeking Jesus comes at Christmas to us, to bid us open even when we do not want to, even if we'd prefer distraction or to be left alone, not for his comfort, but ours. Though he will be wounded and rejected, forsaken and failed, he takes on such sufferings so that when we open our hearts to Him, we receive all that we need: *love that makes all things new*.

The poem ends in what seems like a tragedy, as the every-one-of-us narrator waits until the voice is gone, the lingering footsteps slow to pass finally fade before opening the door. But lest we should despair and "fear that the one who despised and rejected the stranger has in her or his turn been despised and rejected,"⁴ as well, let us read the final lines once more:

² Ibid., 46.

³ Ibid., 47.

⁴ Ibid.

I saw upon the grass
Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door
The mark of blood for evermore.

The true hope and peace and joy of Christmas come from the love of the one so often despised and rejected. The love that compelled our suffering Savior, the Lamb of God, the Passover Lamb, to **cover the doorpost of even a closed door**. “In a poem that has been unsparing in its insight into how bitterness and rejection [what many of us have felt this year especially] only beget more bitterness and rejection—a poem about a closed-door—Christina Rossetti nevertheless invites us in the last lines to open the door to the possibility of salvation, even and especially for the one who has most bitterly rejected the blood that saves.”⁵

He stands at the door of one who has shut their heart to the love that “has always been our lives’ foundation,” as the psalmist said and which Dana read just moments ago. Closed off to God’s “fidelity,” which “has been the roof over our world” from the beginning and continues even when we hesitate, doubt, and wonder.

[While lighting the fourth Advent candle, say:] We light this fourth candle of Advent, the candle of the gift of love which knocks for us this very morning, as ones who have been loved first. We do so in the expectation that our hearts would be open (hospitable and welcoming in) the one whose love caused him to bleed to bring us grace.

Let’s pray.

Father, among many of your congregations this season, “In the Bleak Midwinter” has been and will be sung. A song that rings true not for its atmospheric accuracy, but because the chill of anxiety, the freeze of fear, the iciness of hate, the frigidness of exclusion and violence leave our world and hearts “bleak,” unwelcoming. And still, in the bleakness of midwinter, on the snowy roads of our lives, comes God-with-us, *Emmanuel*. May the warmth of his light, his presence, warm away winter anxiety, thaw away winter fear, melt away winter hate, break the frozen winter violence among us and our neighbors with his faithful love. His love is our foundation and our covering. Jesus came powerfully and sacrificially into the bleakness, and the carol says the Christ child will have “my heart,” and may he have, even more, *our lives*. In his name, amen.⁶

Hymn/Carol

PRE-SERMON READING #1 | LUKE 1:5-17, 23-25, 80

During the rule of Herod, King of Judea, there was a priest assigned service in the regiment of Abijah. His name was Zachariah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron. Her name was Elizabeth. Together they lived honorably before God, careful in keeping to the ways of the commandments and enjoying a clear

⁵ Ibid., 48.

⁶ Adapted from a prayer by Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance*, 87.

conscience before God. But they were childless because Elizabeth could never conceive, and now they were quite old.

It so happened that as Zachariah was carrying out his priestly duties before God, working the shift assigned to his regiment, it came his one turn in life to enter the sanctuary of God and burn incense. The congregation was gathered and praying outside the Temple at the hour of the incense offering. Unannounced, an angel of God appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. Zachariah was paralyzed with fear.

But the angel reassured him, 'Don't fear Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God.

'He'll drink neither wine nor beer. He'll be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment he leaves his mother's womb. He will turn many sons and daughters of Israel back to their God. He will herald God's advent in the style and strength of Elijah, soften the hearts of parents to children, and kindle devout understanding among hardened skeptics—he'll get the people ready for God.'

When the course of his priestly assignment was completed, Zachariah went back home. It wasn't long before his wife, Elizabeth, conceived. She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. 'So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!' she said.

The child, John, grew up healthy and spirited. He lived out in the desert, the wilderness, until the day he made his prophetic debut in Israel.

PRE-SERMON READING #2 | LUKE 1:26-45, 56

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to the Galilean village of Nazareth to a virgin engaged to be married to a man descended from David, the son of Jesse. His name was Joseph, and the virgin's name, Mary. Upon entering, Gabriel greeted her:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you.

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that. But the angel assured her, 'Mary, you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you: You will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus.

He will be great,
be called 'Son of the Highest.'
The Lord God will give him
the throne of his father David;
He will rule Jacob's house forever—
no end, ever, to his kingdom.'

Mary said to the angel, 'But how? I've never slept with a man.'

The angel answered,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
the power of the Highest hover over you;
Therefore, the child you bring to birth
will be called Holy, Son of God.

‘And did you know that your cousin Elizabeth conceived a son, as old as she is? Everyone called her barren, and here she is six months pregnant! Nothing, you see, is impossible with God.’

And Mary said,

Yes, I see it all now:
I’m the Lord’s maid, ready to serve.
Let it be with me
just as you say.

Then the angel left here.

May did not waste a minute. She got up and traveled to a town in Judah in the hill country, straight to Zachariah’s house, and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You’re so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.
Blessed woman, who believed what God said,
believed every word would come true!

Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then went back to her own home.

SERMONETTE | Two Children, One Story

Every gospel story begins with “cousin John.” Matthew, Mark, John, and now Luke have each prepared us to meet Jesus through John the Baptizer. Crazy cousin John, as we’ve lovelily referred to him this Advent, once again makes his way into the story today. This time though, he is not clad in his plaid floppy wool hat, rolling into town on a “tenement on wheels,” which he makes sure we know “that there is RV,” but rather a gift of God’s abundant grace and determined love.

Our texts this fourth Sunday of Advent tell as one story the beginnings of the two cousins, which have been our focus these last several weeks. “Crazy cousin John,” who would grow up to be called the Baptizer, and Jesus, who would grow to be called Messiah, the one who came after the Baptizer but was never second fiddle. Their stories and purposes, intertwined as one from their miraculous beginnings. Both born to bring hope and joy and to usher in peace. Both born to suffer injustice and die violently. One born to prepare the way for the other. One born again from the grave so the other could join suit one day—both born from divine intent, from the love and fidelity (faithfulness) of a Father God.

What we have come to know from cousin John this most unusual year of Advent is echoed in the unexpected angelic visitations and the surprising pregnancies of he and Jesus' beginnings. We, I pray, have been reminded that to receive truly, to welcome in, the gift of Christmas requires neither decorations nor festivities, rituals nor traditions, but rather hearts open to God's presence. Hearts open to God's intrusion in our lives, his coming to save and to serve and to heal and to call and to lead to show us the way to something whole/holy new. Even when we don't want it, least expect it, but surely, most desperately need his arrival.

It is interesting to note how the characters in the cousins' stories responded to the interruption of God with them in the months leading up to our first noel. Zachariah, John's father who would sing a song of trusting hope at the boy's birth (a song we sang too on the first Sunday of Advent), was dumbfounded and eventually muted for the entirety of his wife's pregnancy for his quickness to respond with argumentive doubt rather than honest shock. His wife, however, was not so unprepared for the unexpected. While her husband's faith and vocation should have prepared him well for God to show up, it was Elizabeth's lament, her mourning, and yet persistent faith in the mourning that prepared her to receive what God would bring from her and to her. Listen again to how she responded.

First to her own surprising pregnancy—surprising because of age and, we can be sure, struggles in bearing a child (perhaps miscarriages)—“She went off by herself for five months, relishing her pregnancy. [Saying,] ‘So, this is how God acts to remedy my unfortunate condition!’” Our gospel writers are not much for emotional elaboration, but it would be safe to surmise that Elizabeth's response was not fear of what might be lost but trust in the loving act of her God to “remedy my unfortunate condition!” She was astonished. Her heart open to God's grace and love that, when it filled her, was growing in her; she could not remain where she was. Something had to change; she needed, desired, longed for time alone with what God had given her. She relished not only the gift of a child but the loving act of a Father God in such a surprising time and unexpected way.

Elizabeth's openness also prepares her to recognize God with her when her young cousin comes to visit.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby in her womb leaped. She was filled with the Holy Spirit, and sang out exuberantly,

You're so blessed among women,
and the babe in your womb, also blessed!
And why am I so blessed that
the mother of my Lord visits me?
The moment the sound of your
greeting entered my ears,
The babe in my womb
skipped like a lamb for sheer joy.

Because Elizabeth was prepared, her heart open to God’s love for and through her, she—unlike so many—recognized who her cousin carried into this world, and she welcomed him and Mary in, “Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months...” I wonder what those two talked about those three months?!

Mary, likewise, was open to the amazing realities of God’s love and faithfulness to both her and his people. Unlike John’s father, Mary’s doubt was not unbelief but humble amazement, “How can this be?!” she says to the angel. How could she be worthy to receive such a greeting of profound favor from the creator of the universe? How could God love her so much to give her this role in his faithful plan? How could God love his creation so much that he would enter into their fragility as the most fragile of all creatures? Questions anyone would ask, and yet, her heart was open to the unexpected and overwhelming, even the surprising extent of God’s love and faithfulness. Elizabeth recognized Mary’s openness, perhaps because of her husband’s muteness. She helps us see the openness of her young cousin when she says, “Blessed woman, who believed what God said, believed every word would come true!”

Walter Brueggemann once wrote that “in Advent,” we are to be asking, “What time is this?”⁷ The answer I hope we give today is that it is time to open our hearts to the love and faithfulness of God. A love and fidelity that is surprising in its means and measures of healing and forgiving, unexpected in its honoring and blessing, and unique in the whole and holy newness it brings. This openness is what crazy cousin John has been preparing us. Hearts opened as we take release from sin, make the turn of trust in lament, walk in the way of peace, all because of the love of the Father in the Son.

May we be filled with the Holy Spirit like John’s mother, filled so that we recognize what God is doing within us and how God is coming to us this and every Christmas morn. “Advent is a time,” as Brueggemann answered his own question, “for relinquishing some of the control of fear and wounds and doubt in order to receive the impossible from God.”⁸ In Advent, we open our hearts to receive the impossible love and fidelity of God with us, God for us, in Jesus.

Pray with me.

Break open our hearts and imaginations this Advent, O Father in Heaven and on earth in Spirit, so that we might see a world decisively shaped (grounded and covered) by the fidelity and love of Jesus. Aid us in relinquishing control and fear and wounds and doubt that would keep us from opening the door to Jesus, so that we might receive your newness born through love. Amen.

Song #3

COMMUNION | CANTICLE 9

We added this year a new element to our Advent tradition, the reading of a canticle. These scriptures, often sung as a [chant](#) and fill the sanctuaries, halls, and homes of many of our sisters and brothers around the world

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Celebrating Abundance*, 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

this very morning. Together too, with those of every tribe, tongue, and nation, we receive the gifts of Christmas in Jesus' body broken and blood shed on our behalf. *Anticipating a day when what we do now is not merely shared in spirit but actual space.*

We'll read this morning *Canticle 10, The Second Song of Isaiah*, from Isaiah 55. A hymn that bids our hearts to open and receive the sure gift of Christmas.

I'll read the bulk of the hymn; then we'll say together the highlighted portion.

Canticle 10, The Second Song of Isaiah (Is. 55:6-11)

Seek the Lord while he wills to be found;
 call upon him when he draws near.
Let the wicked forsake their ways
 and the evil ones their thoughts;
And let them turn to the Lord, and he will have compassion,
 and to our God, for he will richly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
 nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
 so are my ways higher than your ways,
 and my thoughts than your thoughts.
For as rain and snow fall from the heavens
 and return not again, but water the earth,
Bringing forth life and giving growth,
 seed for sowing and bread for eating,
So is my word that goes forth from my mouth;
 it will not return to me empty;
But will accomplish that which I have purposed,
 and prosper in that for which I sent it.

**Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.**

Song #4

SCRIPTURE READING | ISAIAH 11:1-10

A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his root a budding Branch.
The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,
the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-God.
Fear-of-God
will be all his joy and delight.

He won't judge by appearances,
won't decide on the basis of hearsay.
He'll judge the needy by what is right,
render decisions on earth's poor with justice.
His words will bring everyone to awed attention.
A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.
Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,
and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

The wolf will romp with the lamb,
the leopard sleep with the kid.
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,
and a little child will tend them.
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,
their calves and cubs grow up together,
and the lion eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,
the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill
on my holy mountain.
The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,
a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

On that day, Jesse's Root will be raised high, posted as a rallying banner for the peoples. The nations will all come to him. His headquarters will be glorious.

Song #5

BENEDICTION | ROMANS 16:17-20, 25-27 (Chaz)

One final word of counsel, friends. Keep a sharp eye out for those who take bits and pieces of the teaching that you learned and then use them to make trouble. Give these people a wide berth. They have no intention of living for our Master Christ. They're only in this for what they can get out of it, and aren't above using pious sweet talk to dupe unsuspecting innocents.

And so while there has never been any question about your honesty in these matters—I couldn't be more proud of you!—I want you also to be smart, making sure every 'good' thing is the real thing. Don't be gullible in regard to smooth-talking evil. Stay alert like this, and before you know it the God of peace will come down on Satan with both feet, stomping him into the dirt. Enjoy the best of Jesus!

All of our praise rises to the One who is strong enough to make you strong, exactly as preached in Jesus Christ, precisely as revealed in the mystery kept secret for so long but now an open book through the prophetic Scriptures. All the nations of the world can now know the truth and be brought into obedient belief, carrying out the orders of God, who got all of this started, down to the very last letter.

All our praise is focused through Jesus on this incomparably wise God! Amen!