

December 22, 2024,
Fourth Sunday of Advent, at St. Michael's Church
The Reverend Joshua Wong

"Heavenly Father, as we light the fourth Advent candle of love, may your love inspire us to love one another as you have loved us. Let your love guide our actions and words. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen."

Please be seated.

There is an English Christmas carol that says simply, "Love came down at Christmas. Love all lovely. Love divine. Love was born at Christmas. Star and angel gave the sign. Love came down at Christmas."

This Christmas carol was written in former Bishop Curry's 2022 Christmas message. In these past four Sundays, we have been preparing ourselves with anticipation and stillness for the birth of Christ the Lord. Today, as we light our fourth and final candle, we contemplate the meaning of love.

Two years ago, when Former Bishop Michael Curry gave his Christmas message about Christmas love, he said, "God's way of love is not naive, it is not unrealistic, it's the way. It's the way to life for us all. Dr. King once said, "Darkness cannot cast out darkness; only the star of Bethlehem can do that. Hatred cannot cast out hatred; only love can do that." Love came down at

Christmas. And as some of us are beginning to say in this Episcopal church of ours, "Love always."

And the greatest act of love was demonstrated by God, who sent His only Son, Jesus Christ to be born on earth, to be among us, then when he ascended to heaven, God's love continued by providing us with an advocate in the Holy Spirit to guide us until the second Advent, when Christ will return to restore the new heaven and a new earth. This is a truly the greatest and most remarkable act of love ever given to humanity. This was the act of love that came down at Christmas.

This season is full of acts of love. When we give a gift, it is an act of love. For some of us, traveling home to be with loved ones is an act of love. Giving a Christmas offering is an act of love. Donating a remembrance poinsettia is an act of love to someone you miss, and even preparing the house for Christmas is an act of love.

God's act of love came down at Christmas time. God's love was not just a promised, but it was an action. Jesus did not just speak about the truth while he was on earth, but He walked it.

Jesus displayed love while He was on earth. He healed the sick and dying, He gave identity to those society did not find valuable. Jesus even turned water into wine at a wedding when there was not enough. Throughout his ministry, Jesus bore humiliation to defend what was just, and experienced torture and misunderstanding in order to fulfill the prophecies. He *obeyed* the will of God all the way to the cross. Jesus showed us that love is not just a word, but an action.

When we think of love in action, we remember many people in the bible. We remember the love of Mary mentioned in our Gospel reading, who said, “Yes,” to the Angel Gabriel who came to her and called her to be the mother of Jesus. It was not easy for her to say, “Yes.” Imagine the cost Mary had to pay when she said “Yes,” she was a single woman pregnant out of wedlock. Imagine the cost of Joseph as well, and how both of them had to raise a child? What would society think of them, sometimes there is a cost to God when we say “Yes.”

Today, what is the cost for you to say “Yes” to Jesus? When you love someone, what is the cost involved? How might we take inspiration from Mary?

When we reflect on the meaning of Christmas, we may need to consider two fundamental truths. The first is that Christmas **is** about God’s unconditional love for us, and also, Christmas is about our response to that love. For Mary, her heart magnifies the Lord, and her action is to say “Yes” to God’s love. How do we appreciate God for our Christmas gift? In our lives, how is God calling us to act? When God calls us to act, it is always to help make us better people.

Our Collect of the Day says, “Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself.” Advent is not only a time of anticipating His first coming, but also a time to prepare for His second coming to heal the earth. As the Collect says, how are we preparing our personal mansions, our hearts for God?

Now days, when we hear the term, “Call,” we often think of a formal ordained capacity. This person was “called” to ministry...There’s nothing wrong with that, if God is calling you, into ministry, you must discern, but God calls us in different sorts of ministry activities and capacities that don’t involve ordination. Currently, you may be called to do the work you are doing without any change. You may be called to serve in the vestry, or to serve in children’s ministry. But, being called to say “Yes,” may sometimes be the Holy Spirit nudging you to go to speak to someone, or care for someone. Whether a simple “hello,” or a life changing action, love for God takes acting on it.

The paradox of saying “Yes” to God, is that it can be at times deeply fulfilling and utterly terrifying. We can see it from Elizabeth and Mary’s conversation in our Gospel reading today. Mary, in one minute was full of excitement, and yet in another moment filled with the unknown. But, as we know, God was with her and Joseph throughout their lives, which shows us that whenever we answer “Yes” to God, He will help us do what needs to be done. When our church says “Yes” to God, God will help us do what His will is for the church.

Beyond being frightened, saying “Yes” to God can also be wildly inconvenient at times, if not utterly life changing. Jesus’ disciples said “Yes,” to God. His disciple, made up of both men and the women, followed Jesus who called them to give up everything, their homes, their employment, and even their families, in order to take off with a person who appeared to be a pretty ordinary person. Yet, somehow, they knew that this was not an ordinary person, and they knew in their hearts that it was worthwhile to follow Him.

So, like Mary, how do we know to say “Yes” to God? I believe that anytime the Holy Spirit leads us to something we should do, our action will draw us outside of ourselves, and bring us closer to God. Saying “Yes” to God will always deepen our understanding of ourselves and to God.

In our world today, there are so many “voices” expressing beliefs, opinions, and promises, calling us to follow them. But do they lead us into acts of love? Does it lead us outside of our selves and bring us closer to God? The Christmas story was not merely a proclamation of love, but it was an act that involved risk, sacrifice, and deep involvement.

Love came down at Christmas and so let this Christmas be a moment of rededication to the work of love in the world. As Howard Thurman wrote long ago, "When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star and the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are at home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, then the work of Christmas begins. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among others, to make music in the heart."

For love came down at Christmas, and our work is to love always. God loves us. God bless you and your family, and may God hold us all in his arms of love.

Amen.