

'Expect love, but you gotta say: "Yes".' Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC, 21st December 2008

In each of our Sunday services during Advent, we have lit a candle symbolizing one of God's great gifts to us. The first Sunday we lit the candle of Hope, the second Sunday the candle of Peace, the third Sunday the candle of Joy and how we celebrated this last week with our Lessons and Carols! Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent we have lit the candle of Love. Yes, we say this holiday season is about love. We give and receive love as we give and receive Christmas cards, as we give and receive presents. And this is a good clue to what love is; it is something that has to be given and received. We thought the other week of how, if we are to expect peace, we have to make peace, being peaceable ourselves. Similarly, if we are to expect love, we have got to be able to give and receive love. Loving is an activity and it is something that cannot be forced. It cannot be compelled. It can only happen if we say: 'yes' to something.

The supreme model of saying 'yes' is surely Mary as Luke presents her in this morning's gospel. Let's look again at Mary's response to the angel Gabriel and what it teaches us about love. We, of course, idealize and romanticize Mary. Our crib-scenes are made to look quite a suitable place for the birth of a baby. But when we really picture a smelly stable, perhaps for us a smelly barn, then we are reminded of the surprising nature of love. This is where Mary's 'yes' to the angel Gabriel's invitation to love led her. If we truly desire to receive the God of love, then we may have to give up some aspirations and agendas, however noble they may seem. How receptive are we to the God who will not be confined or enshrined but retains and cherishes the freedom to surprise us – as in the coming of Christ down the back stairs of Bethlehem, to be born of Mary, grow up in the hick town of Nazareth, spend his time with the least, the lowly, and the lost, and most surprising of all, become "obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross"? Could that same God be leading the church in new and unthought-of directions?'¹ If we are to expect love, we must be prepared for it to be surprising. It may be that we have to catch up with God, to find him acting before we do and catching us by surprise.

Let me read you a poem by the poet, W H Auden. Although he lived much of his life in America, he was born in Britain and you will hear mention, therefore of the southern-English towns of Maidenhead and Brighton and of crossing the Atlantic. It's quite a long poem, but it's quite light and, quite funny. It captures, I think, the surprise of love. It is entitled: *O Tell Me The Truth About Love*:

Some say love's a little boy,
And some say it's a bird,
Some say it makes the world go around,
Some say that's absurd,
And when I asked the man next-door,
Who looked as if he knew,
His wife got very cross indeed,
And said it wouldn't do.

Does it look like a pair of pyjamas,
Or the ham in a temperance hotel?
Does its odour remind one of llamas,
Or has it a comforting smell?
Is it prickly to touch as a hedge is,
Or soft as eiderdown fluff?
Is it sharp or quite smooth at the edges?
O tell me the truth about love.

Our history books refer to it
In cryptic little notes,
It's quite a common topic on

¹ Eugene C Bay in *Feasting on the Word*, ed David L Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, John Knox Press (2008) p 78

The Transatlantic boats;
I've found the subject mentioned in
Accounts of suicides,
And even seen it scribbled on
The backs of railway guides.

Does it howl like a hungry Alsatian,
Or boom like a military band?
Could one give a first-rate imitation
On a saw or a Steinway Grand?
Is its singing at parties a riot?
Does it only like Classical stuff?
Will it stop when one wants to be quiet?
O tell me the truth about love.

I looked inside the summer-house;
It wasn't over there;
I tried the Thames at Maidenhead,
And Brighton's bracing air.
I don't know what the blackbird sang,
Or what the tulip said;
But it wasn't in the chicken-run,
Or underneath the bed.

Can it pull extraordinary faces?
Is it usually sick on a swing?
Does it spend all its time at the races,
Or fiddling with pieces of string?
Has it views of its own about money?
Does it think Patriotism enough?
Are its stories vulgar but funny?
O tell me the truth about love.

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking my nose?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

And there the poem ends. Surely one point the writer intends to get across is that love cannot be defined. It cannot be put under a dictionary definition and limited to that. Rather love is experienced. But there are some truths, says the poet, that can be told about love. First, it is surprising. Second it is risky. Third it is down-to-earth.

We've thought a bit about the surprise of love for Mary and for us. Let's think now about the risk of our assent to love. Our 'yes' might also have to come before we are given complete instructions on how we are to proceed. Imagine the possible questions Mary might well have asked Gabriel:

'Hey, wait just a minute here ... answer me these!

'Will Joseph stick around after he hears about all this?

'Will my parents understand – and still love me?

'Will my friends stand by me, or will I be the laughing stock of my high school for sleeping around?

'Will the labor be hard?

'Will there be someone there to help me when my time comes?

'You say the child will be king of Israel, his future is set – but what about me? Will I survive his birth? What about me?'

When we hail Mary, let us name her the first who, for the sake of Jesus, loved day after day in what Martin Buber has aptly called 'holy insecurity' – a daily walk of faith in which you do not know even the next step, let alone what the end product will be. But you keep on putting one foot after the next anyway. Let's remember too the ordinariness of Mary, at her deep humanness. In recent weeks, seldom a day has passed when we haven't heard about the latest choice of the President-Elect for a particular office. First, there is the speculation: a few possible candidates are mentioned. And then comes the announcement. Barack Obama has tapped 'so and so' for 'such and such' a role. Now so far as being tapped by Gabriel for being the mother of God, Mary was not on any short-list. She wasn't expecting the call. So her reaction to Gabriel's visit is cautious at best. Living in a remote village far from the busy religious center of Jerusalem, she had no hint that she was destined for a singularly distinctive role. What if she had said: 'No'? What if her final answer was: I can't take the risk?

Listen to these words from the writer, C S Lewis. We perhaps associate that name with the Narnia Chronicles, but you may have come across his other writings. One volume I particularly value is entitled *A Grief Observed*, written when his wife, Joy was dying. In another smallish volume, *The Four Loves*, C S Lewis has this to say about the activity of loving: 'To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one. Not even an animal. Wrap it carefully with hobbies and luxuries, avoid all entanglements and keep it safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in the casket-safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.'

There will be many here this morning who know all too well the vulnerability of love. Some will know it by recollecting, all too clearly, heartache and heartbreak in years gone by. Some will know right now what it is to have their heart aching or breaking. As Lewis says, the only way to avoid this is to say: 'No' to love, to wrap your heart in cotton wool. What a price to pay to avoid the pain of love! What strong words Lewis uses: the heart will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

When we look at Mary, we see God's redeeming love, his all-redeeming love. We Protestants tend to be rather nervous of speaking of Mary as the mother of God. Mother of Jesus, mother of God's son we can just about handle, but mother of God. Yet, we see in Mary's assent to give birth to God's son, the way in which she gives birth to God himself. She gives birth to a son whom she will see predecease her, whose love will be rejected. Many will say 'No' to what Jesus stands for and some will scoff, torment, and ultimately kill him. And in this, Christians affirm, lies God's redemption of humankind.

Yes, giving and receiving love is risky. God in his love for us takes the risk of becoming human. Mary takes all sorts of risks. God himself takes all sorts of risks. We think at this time of his taking the risk of becoming human and all that this entails. Theologians speak of the 'Scandal of particularity'; they recognize that it can offend our sensibilities to ponder how the omnipotent, omniscient Creator of the universe entered into the particularities of historical existence. The reality of God's entry into Mary changes forever our understanding of God. No longer can we say that divine omnipotence is inconsistent with divine in compatibility. Nothing is impossible with God, as Mary says. This does not mean, however, that God can bash his way into us, can enter us whether we give our assent or not. And it certainly does not mean that God, both in his mother Mary and his son Jesus, will not suffer. They all will suffer the pain that, as C S Lewis reminded us, always goes with loving.

The third thing that Auden's poem about love and Mary's response to Gabriel bring home to us is: love essentially is down-to-earth. Although Mary cannot comprehend the full meaning of Gabriel's message ('How can this be?'), she is not a passive recipient of the news. She responds actively, a willing partner in the holy disruption that befalls her. Remember what she says: 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then and then only does Gabriel depart from her. She has got the message. Mary's response to the annunciation is exemplary. What she says is a great big: 'Yes' to love. Mary comprehends that her life, and not only hers, but the whole world's, is about to be rearranged. She

accepts God's vision for the future of the world. So let us this Christmas open our hearts to receive and to receive love. May each of us, looking on the vulnerability of a baby, be able to see God and respond: 'here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' So we need to ask ourselves this morning. Do we expect love this Christmas? In what form do we expect love to come? 'He came down that we might have love' we sang before the sermon. 'He came down that we might have peace'; 'He came down that we might have joy.' Do we believe this about God?

There was a Swedish diplomat called Dag Hammarskjöld. He was Secretary-general of the United Nations and the posthumous winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1961. Dag Hammarskjöld knew well enough that love, peace, and joy are not easily come by in our world. He didn't romanticize the way to joy, peace, and love; but he knew that all these things, and especially love, require our assent. He put this in a very pithy way when he said: 'For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes.' This confirms the third thing about love, doesn't it? Love is not only surprising. Love is not only risky. Love is also down-to-earth. The little insert on Love in the bulletin this morning reminds us that Jesus says that the greatest commandment is to love God with your whole being. The insert then suggests that it was Jesus who added the commandment to love your neighbor. It asks: 'Why do you think Jesus added 'love of neighbor' to the original text? What do you think experts of the law thought this addition at the time? Believe you me: the expert of the law in Jesus' day knew very well the command to love your neighbor as yourself. This commandment comes in the Book of Leviticus (19:18) and Leviticus is one of the five books of the Torah, the Jewish Law. The lawyers of Jesus' day would know not only the basic command but also all the very specific ways that are spelt out in Leviticus and the other law-books in the Bible for how to love your neighbor as yourself. What Jesus is doing is not teaching anything they didn't know, but he is reminding them that love of God can never be separated from love of neighbor. We can be vague and sentimental about love of God. We can kid ourselves that we love him. But God's love came down-to-earth. 'Love came down as Christmas', we sing. God shows us his love in specific, earthy ways and any response that's worth the name 'love' must be equally specific. God's love cannot stay up in some imaginary heaven. It expresses itself in human form. So let each of us say, with Dag Hammarskjöld 'For all that has been, thanks. For all that will be, yes.'