

**12.22.24 ~ Advent 4 ~ Love**

**“God Does Love Us!”**

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

**Psalm 80:1-7** <sup>NIV</sup>

*For the director of music. To the tune of “The Lilies of the Covenant.” Of Asaph. A psalm.*

- <sup>1</sup> Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,  
you who lead Joseph like a flock.  
You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,  
shine forth <sup>2</sup> before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh.  
Awaken your might;  
come and save us.  
<sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.  
<sup>4</sup> How long, Lord God Almighty,  
will your anger smolder  
against the prayers of your people?  
<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears;  
you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.  
<sup>6</sup> You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors,  
and our enemies mock us.  
<sup>7</sup> Restore us, God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

**Leader: These Words of Prayer Are for God.**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Luke 1:39-45** <sup>NLT</sup>

*Mary Visits Elizabeth*

<sup>39</sup> A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town <sup>40</sup> where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> At the sound of Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth’s child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, “God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. <sup>43</sup> Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? <sup>44</sup> When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. <sup>45</sup> You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”

**Leader: These Babes and Expectant Words Are from God!**

**All: Thanks be to God!**

**Please pray with me:**

Loving God, we come again to you this Sunday in gratitude for the Christmas story and this time of Advent expectancy. May our worship together singing, playing, praying, and learning be a blessing to you as much as to us. Help us to relax a bit now to prepare ourselves for Jesus, the Messiah. May we actively choose hope over

despair, peace over conflict, joy over sadness, and love over hate. During this season and today's message, may we affirm our love and relationship with you so we may share it with others at this time of year. Speak to us through your messenger and this message. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Merry Christmas! Well, are you ready yet? You don't have to answer that, but knowing you pretty well, you are probably all decorated, wrapped, cards mailed, and lunches celebrated. If not, that's ok too, because we are human, and life happens in between our many plans. A friend of mine had a day-long funeral and fellowship yesterday for his aunt after a stressful final exam week. I remember those times I was working full time, taking classes, or working on Capitol Hill. Christmas was always the last priority until a few days before. As a pastor, however, we start planning in September, and with our four weeks of Advent, even if not physically ready, I am always spiritually ready for the Messiah's birth! I hope you are too. Please be here Tuesday at 3 pm for our Christmas Eve service with wonderful instrumental and vocal music, lessons, prayer, candlelight, and communion.

This time of year, people ask me how can we celebrate when so many bad things are happening in the world or even in our neighborhoods? Of course I do not have all the answers; we are flawed human beings so there will always be violence. But this is why I love Advent, so we can focus each week on the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus brings to the world.

The context of our Psalm reading this morning was dire. Things were not good. It was written as a lament after defeat in a military campaign, and the people who prayed asked God for deliverance and

salvation. He had not abandoned them, but God, was angry with their sin and their self-serving prayers. As we also heard in the prophecies read over recent weeks, in times of duress, our prayers start out “woe is me” and then plea for God’s mercy and forgiveness. After the blame and shame of their prayer, the people bargained with God, hoping he would not punish but rather lead and care for them as a Shepherd does. They were tired of their diet of tears and handwringing. Sometimes it takes such a wake-up call to repent and receive humbly the glorious savior of the world, Jesus. As we close out our season, let us also pray this part of the Psalm: “<sup>7</sup> Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.”

The second passage from Luke comes after Mary received the announcement of her **calling** to be the virgin mother of Christ, what is called in classical art and church tradition, *The Annunciation*. Callings of any kind to serve God are not easy to explain to friends or family. At first, she was afraid, but the angel Gabriel reassured her and told her how Elizabeth, Mary’s cousin, had also received a calling to bear a child who would be a witness, John, to her son’s own ministry.

In our passage today, Elizabeth, a priest’s wife and several decades older than Mary, had a key role to affirm Mary and her baby. Elizabeth had been barren all her life, and then suddenly, beyond middle age, she discovered that she was carrying a child. Her child would become John the Baptist, the herald of Jesus, the Son of God! As Mary arrived to spend time with Elizabeth, who was about six months along, the baby, John, jumped in her womb. Elizabeth had felt him move before, of course, but this time was different. One scholar wrote that John evangelized even

before birth! Elizabeth's reaction is a prophecy that Mary's baby is God incarnate and that Mary herself is loved: "45 Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

As you'll read in today's insert, love is harder with some people or in some circumstances, isn't it? Love is a demanding virtue that must be nurtured and lived out in daily life with God's help. Love cannot rely on human willpower, but it is a choice. The types of love—*agape*, *philea*, *eros*, and *storge*—require a human and spiritual cooperation to be fulfilled. God's love provides the best example: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16 KJV)." That's the main reason we celebrate Christmas! "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given . . . (Isaiah 9:6)." God does love us, warts and all!

Last week's combined worship service and huge fellowship meal was an outward demonstration of God's love for humankind and the body of Christ called the church. All three churches celebrated our ability to serve the community, and the workers who make it happen twice monthly. Congratulations, volunteers and donors! And thank you to all who brought delicious food to share. It was a joy to see eleven of our Food Mission guests in attendance, receiving not just a meal, but the joy of fellowship and Christmas spirit. We even have an eleven-year-old volunteer! The energy and love for others was evident in the room. Thank you church for the opportunity to continue this food giveaway. **We love** because **he** first loved us; let us remember that especially during these challenging times in which we live. Mary and Elizabeth are good illustrations of making the best of difficult situations. They met for

companionship, but God meant for them to support one another. Because both children, John and Jesus, were conceived by the loving Holy Spirit of God, the babies even recognized each other in the womb! That loving fellowship is significant, just as our efforts to love others we do not know are important to the Lord.

During this frantic season, let us slow down a little to practice the art of love. How you live it out is personal to you, but may I encourage us to be mindfully present in all we do over the next week or so? People are travelling, still shopping frantically, and partying, so use care driving, and smile at one another. Even a quick *“thank you for your hard work, especially this season”* to the Amazon delivery guy (who actually had a **cart** for the whole street!) brought a smile to his face yesterday and a brief interaction. For an industry that serves demanding and not always nice customers, that flash of agape love may be the only love he feels this Christmas! Service people of all types are exhausted right now, so treat them kindly and give good tips to servers. We can show our love in that small way. For your own physical and spiritual health, please practice forgiveness this time of year, even to the agitated driver who honks—let them pass. Stay safe and enjoy the Christ follower’s perspective you have this time of year. Christ is coming! Christ is with us, Emmanuel! Christ will come again in glory! Get ready! Amen? Amen! ||

**Let us pray.** Eternal God, we thank you today and every day for your gift of beauty, hope, peace, joy, and love! We ask you to open our hearts to love the unlovable this season. May your love fill our lives, our homes, and our relationships, drawing us together. Be with us Christmas Eve and Christmas Day as we celebrate Jesus’ birth. In his name, we pray, Amen.