

## ***Love Changes Everything***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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### **Mary Remembers** – Based on Luke 1:39–55

As we prepare for Christmas birth, we hear a story we hear every year at this time, but told in a different way. Let us listen for how, again, God's vision includes surprising heroes, like an unmarried, ordinary, girl living in a rather unremarkable town.

Pilgrims and merchants often stayed overnight in Bethlehem when they were on their way to Egypt. But it was never crowded like this. Camels and donkeys, dogs and wagons clogged the narrow roads that led into town. People were everywhere. Mary and Joseph looked around. It had been a long and tiring journey from their home in Nazareth, and now what were they to do? Where would they stay? Mary would soon have a baby.

Mary decided to sit on a wooden bench and wait while Joseph went from house to house looking for a room where they might stay. While Mary waited, she thought back to the very first moment the angel Gabriel appeared and announced to her that she would have a baby. What a surprise that was! Not long after, she left the city of Nazareth and travelled south to a town in the hill country of Judea. Elizabeth, a relative, was having a special baby, too.

Mary remembered calling out to Elizabeth when she neared her home. And she could still remember Elizabeth's words and actions when she opened the door and saw her. "Mary," she cried and hugged her at the same time. "It is so good to see you. I am filled with such joy! I just felt my baby inside me move. It is almost as if the baby had heard your call. God has blessed you. And you are going to have a very special baby."

A thin ray of moonlight crept across Mary's face as she shifted on the bench. Memories of her time with Elizabeth brought a smile to her face. For three months, they had shared stories, sang songs, prayed together, and prepared for the birth of their babies. Tears of joy ran down Mary's face as she hummed the song she so often sang while they sat in the garden...

With all my heart, I praise God. I am so happy! For God has blessed me and done great things for me. How good and wonderful is God! What God has done for me will never be forgotten. Holy is God's name. God feeds the hungry and helps the poor. God remembers our people, our families, our friends. God's promises live in us today. How good and wonderful is God!

"Yes," thought Mary, "I am blessed for sure." And she raised her head to see a loving Joseph coming toward her. She could see in his eyes that it was okay. Soon her baby would be born – her song would have a place in the world.

Let us pray: O God, how amazed we are by your surprising, and revolutionary ways. Open our hearts this Christmas season to sing with Elizabeth and Mary your song of justice and love to all the world. Amen.

What a year this has been – right? Yes, it has felt like the movie “Groundhog Day” – trying to get out of the big loop – but didn’t the year bring you at least a few surprises? For me there were a few blessings hidden underneath curses this year. Let me explain.

Earlier this year, I was playing soccer, I’m not very good at it; but this one day I thought, for a fleeting moment, that I was Cristiano Ronaldo as I jumped to kick the ball. I learned that I wasn’t Ronaldo as I landed badly. That accident resulted in a great deal of tender loving care; something I’m not very comfortable with, some of you caring for me.

Later this year, I again was being absent minded, and ran down the stairs here at St. Andrew’s before worship, I tripped and injured my ankle. Among the few people in this sanctuary are some of my heroes who stepped into action as I hobbled to the hospital. Don’t worry about me – I cringed – as I received, sometimes un-gracefully, your gestures filled with grace.

Love can do that – turn things around, disorienting us. Have you ever witnessed the radical, sometimes disorienting, reverberations catalyzed by love?

In Newfoundland I was stunned to see people honk, not in anger, but to say hello. I was at a stop sign in St. John’s, and the person with right-of-way stops, honks and gestures for me to pull in front of him. It is disorienting – kindness, people intervening to help another, when bad behaviour seem all too often the norm.

And then we behold young Mary and much older Elizabeth. Two heroic women within the context of the patriarchy of their times where usually it was male heroes who got named, not as often women. For the storyteller, Luke, this is the beginning of many reversals. This canticle of Mary, the Magnificat, is as bold as it is beautiful. Talk about a strange turn of events, a young peasant girl, who is given a great and holy gift, and who raises not just a few eyebrows as, instead of fixating on her gift, she proclaims how God has brought justice for the weak and downtrodden; has brought down the mighty and arrogant from their pedestals.

This adolescent is a prophet!

God’s love and justice work is only just beginning, she says. Wouldn’t that be something! Seeing justice done. Seeing people making decisions for the good of community, not just based on our individual desires or fears.

My son Benjamin has asked me a few times: what superpower would you like to have? I have always been bit of a web-spinner wannabe, climbing walls. Visions of grandeur, saving the day, taking on evil villains. That isn’t Mary’s superpower, though – her superpower is trust.

Remember the story of Zechariah, Elizabeth’s elderly husband? The angel told him that he was going to be a dad, and he didn’t believe. Mary was open, even if perhaps terrified, to the mission that the angel Gabriel gave her. This small-town girl was endowed with a vision, a prophecy, that I’m guessing she didn’t fully understand. But she trusted. This baby was not just about her, it was a gift to the world.

Well, I’m wondering aloud here: *I wonder if Advent preparation for Christmas this year is about revisiting that big vision of God, the kin-dom vision, for our world.*

Reviewing this past year like a tidal pool (photo of a beach with tidal pools). Seen from a distance, the landscape of this year rather bland. Potholes in rocks to avoid stepping into. But bend down (*Photo on screen of urchins, anemones, sea stars*), and look closely at those holes, bend down, And you see beautiful realities, blessings hidden.

This is the final week as we approach Christmas. A different Christmas. A different Christmas from last year, Christmas last year being profoundly different from any before. Where is the blessing within, underneath, what seems anything but gift? The metaphor of birth, and labour, is often used around now. The power of the story is not just in a tired couple arriving in Bethlehem, and finding no room in the Inn. The power isn't in the story of a baby born in an animal feeding trough. The power is in the mess.

This is messy stuff – labour pains, swallowing the fear, trusting. The Biblical Good News is that birth is in and around us. Love is being born anew in us, whether we want to bend down and notice it or not. God's justice-seeking, radically loving power is flowing, always - it has always flowed through unsuspecting heroes, like Mary and Elizabeth. Heroes usually not obvious choices. God seems to work like that – working through ordinary people. Keep your eyes, ears and heart open for what God will do through you, how love will be borne in you this Christmas. Amen.