

Could Emmanuel Come to Help Us Now?

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

December 17, 2023, Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary Sunday

Luke 1:26-55

Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, an Open and Affirming Congregation, on this this Fourth Sunday of Advent, Mary Sunday and Sunday of Love. Welcome to you who are in the sanctuary and welcome to you online. Once a young mother came home feeling exhausted from work. Her children were waiting for her to decorate the tree. It had been a dreary day, but as she got out of the car the clouds parted around one star. She took a deep breath, letting its beauty fill her. It was what she needed, a glimpse of hope and peace in the darkness, just enough to go in the house and shine, like an Advent star of joy and love for her children. This is our task: to allow ourselves to be filled with the light that comes to us in the midst of darkness, and then pass that gift on to others. Let us open our hearts to whatever light we find here and allow it to shine after the service, both in person and on Zoom, extending our care and support especially to those we do not know or know are struggling, so all may go out from here shining greater light into the world.

Call to Worship Advent can feel peaceful if we sink into quiet darkness with a candle, prayer or music. Yet we are waiting for someone born to an unwed, teenage refugee, a pregnant pawn being moved across an invaded, occupied land by a ruthless empire of power and wealth. We are waiting for a child who will lead us into conflict against the forces of selfishness, violence and greed.

Advent's contemplative nature seems incongruous, but it offers the secret to following the Spirit of Jesus and Mary. Thomas Merton was a contemplative who was active in the Civil Rights and Peace movements. He wrote that Mary's great gift was emptying herself of self so she could be like a pure pane of glass through which the light of God's love could shine.

Advent waiting and watching in faith is the first step of the self-emptying that leads to inner transformation so that we bring more powerful Christ-like love into the world.

Let us enter into the story of Mary, and listen for our own angel calling us, like her, to be transformed so that we can help transform the world. We begin with Mary's Magnificat, her response to what God is doing through her.

Advent Candle Lighting: Jesus taught that everything in all ethics and religion comes down to loving God and loving our neighbor as our self. So today on this last Sunday of Advent we give the place of honor to the candle of love. The scriptures talk about the light of God's love in Jesus Christ. Here is some of what the first letter of John says:

“God is light...Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light...We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help...? God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them... The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

The word Advent means the approach or coming of something. We light this candle to proclaim our faith in the coming of Christ's light into the world. With Christ's advent come three forms of love: God's love of us; our love of God; and God's love and ours for all people and all creation. Christ's love is a light that shines in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome—a light that shines in us when we love.

Giving love is as much a gift as receiving love. So we do this with thanks to God for all the love we have received in our life, and for all the love we have been able to give to others. This Advent we ask that we may be as generous-hearted as Jesus was, who gave love to all people: old and young, healthy and sick, rich and poor, strangers and enemies. We ask the Holy Spirit to help us find ways to shine the light of love especially on those who need it most in this darkest time of the year.

Let us pray together the Traditional Version of the Lord's Prayer...

Could Emmanuel Come to Help Us Now?

The translation of Mary's Magnificat that we read this morning says, “You have brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; you have filled the hungry with

good things and sent the rich away empty. You have come to the aid of all the hurting children of the earth.”

Mary was prophesying what the baby in her womb would do for the world. It is the hope we express in Advent when we sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

The word Emmanuel means “God with us.” God is always with us if we mean the Spirit of the universe that creates and draws life forward on an evolutionary path toward greater life and love.

But when we use the word Emmanuel we mean more than that, we mean a human manifestation of that Spirit who can help us overcome destructive forces, who can help us end war and heal the earth and establish a sustainable and just way for humanity to live by the laws of love.

Emmanuel has a personal meaning, too: a friend who holds us when we are anxious or in grief or despair and walks with us through the valley of the shadow of death toward a new dawn.

Even if we believe that such a person once was born to Mary in Bethlehem, we may struggle to believe he is with us now and can help us through the hopelessness of this time. But we need all the help we can get, and if there is a higher power that is stronger than bombs and monolithic industries and hate-filled politicians, we need that power on our side now.

So could it happen? Could Emmanuel come now in our hour of need?

The writer and theologian Frederick Buechner and his wife were visiting their friend Dudley’s widow when he appeared to Buechner in a dream. Buechner asked, “Are you really there, Dudley? Can you prove it?” Dudley said, “Of course,” and plucked a strand of wool out of his sweater and tossed it to Buechner who caught it between his thumb and forefinger. It felt so real he woke up.

Buechner shared the dream at breakfast and his wife said she had seen the thread on the floor and was certain it hadn’t been there when they went to bed. Buechner rushed back upstairs and there it was.

If a friend comes, could Jesus?

Recently Christina’s father was on a trip when he got a call from the plumber redoing his bathroom. The plumber shared some news about the job and then said, “There’s one other thing. The television in your bedroom came on by itself the other day. One of my men went in to

investigate, and it was *The Wizard of Oz*. After a few minutes, the TV turned itself off again. Does that make any sense to you?”

Christina’s mother watched the Wizard of Oz in that bedroom countless times. She died an untimely death several years ago, but the answering machine still has her voice on it referring to *The Wizard of Oz* and her wicked witch of the west bumper sticker still graces the car. So when the plumber asked if it made sense, Christina’s father said simply, “Yes.”

My cousin Cyrus Eaton was a prominent businessman who entertained heads of state and convened international peace conferences. He was a hard-boiled, no-nonsense rationalist.

He was taking a bath one night when his mother-in-law shocked him by walking into the bathroom. She said, “Cyrus, I’ve just come to say goodbye.” He said “Goodbye, Eve,” and she left. It took him a minute to remember that Eve was a hundred miles away in a coma. Just then the phone rang. It was the hospital calling to say she had died.

If mothers-in-law come, could Emmanuel?

A classmate of mine, Eben Alexander, was a Harvard neuroscientist who contracted bacterial meningitis and rapidly fell into a deep coma. He was brain-dead but they kept him on life support for many days. Miraculously, he fully recovered, but while his brain was not registering any activity he had experienced life-changing encounters in a spiritual realm. He was accompanied there by a woman he had never met.

Eben was adopted and did not know his biological family. Sometime after his recovery he discovered that he had a sister who had died. When he finally saw her photograph, he was shocked to recognize the woman who had spent those days with him in the afterlife.

Frederick Buechner wrote about that thread, “Even though I had the thing right there in my hand, my first inclination was to deny it for the simple reason, I suspect, that it was so unsettling to my whole common-sense view of the way the world works that it was easier and less confusing just to shrug it off as a crazy fluke. I think we are all inclined to do that. But maybe it wasn’t a fluke. Maybe it was a crazy little peek behind the curtain, a dim little whisper of providence from the wings.”

Buechner asks, “If you had to bet your life, which one would you bet it on...? It’s our lives themselves we’re betting with in the sense that the betting is what shapes our lives....

“The evidence both ways is fragmentary, fragile, ambiguous... Whether we bet Yes or No, it is equally an act of faith.”

I believe these stories, yet it still is difficult to overcome my rational mind and bet Yes. Lately, I have begun to think that I need to give them a more central place in my faith as hopelessness rises at what is happening in our country and the world.

If spiritual beings can come to us, then why could the spiritual being we call Emmanuel not come to us now in our time of need?

Henry Nouwen’s book *Discernment* is about discerning the presence of the divine in daily life and the transformation that comes from it. The first followers of Jesus gained insights that changed human consciousness and powers that changed world history by experiencing his presence after his death.

Nouwen says, “Rather than expecting a life without disappointments or moments of depression, they [saw] that Jesus comes to meet us right in those moments, with hope and the potential for a new way of seeing and believing.” We can cultivate that relationship to have it more consistently in our lives just by remembering that it is possible, “anticipating seeing Jesus in unexpected ways in our hearts.”

Advent is designed to help us remember, anticipate and cultivate the light-filled presence of the Spirit of Jesus in our lives. We identify with Mary, suddenly facing a strange world in which we feel vulnerable and powerless. Advent turns us toward the angels and Spirit that are on our side.

Henry Nouwen says, “We discern Christ in the present moment when we cease to be afraid.” Advent comforts and reassures us that we do not have to be afraid in whatever darkness we are passing through. It reminds us to trust in the coming light that will turn this shadowed, cold world around to a new spring, a renewal of humanity and the earth.

If ghost stories and life-after-life experiences help you have that trust, good! If contemplative practice to find the light within your heart helps, good! If going out under the stars or into the woods helps, good! If working for peace or making soup for a sick neighbor helps, good! If immersing in inspired books or music helps, good! Please use the rest of Advent and the rest of your life to do what helps you trust that Emmanuel is here now, Christ living with and in and through us, as individuals and as a church. This is what our angel is calling us to do.

Let us pray in silence, repeating Mary's response of ultimate trust in the higher power that called her: "Let it be with me according to your word."

Haiku by Herbert A. Goertz:

Turkeys one two three
flew into the apple tree
shaking down the fruit.