

**The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands**  
**Rev. Cheryl Raine**  
**December 22, 2019 – The Fourth Sunday of Advent**

**First Reading is Psalm 80:3-7, 14-19**

<sup>3</sup> *Restore us, O God;*

*let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

<sup>4</sup> O LORD God of hosts,

how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

<sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears,

and given them tears to drink in full measure.

<sup>6</sup> You make us the scorn of our neighbors;

our enemies laugh among themselves.

<sup>7</sup> *Restore us, O God of hosts;*

*let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

<sup>14</sup> Turn again, O God of hosts;

look down from heaven, and see;

have regard for this vine,

<sup>15</sup> the stock that your right hand planted.

<sup>16</sup> They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;

may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

<sup>17</sup> But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,

the one whom you made strong for yourself.

<sup>18</sup> Then we will never turn back from you;

give us life, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup> *Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;*

*let your face shine, that we may be saved.*

**Second Reading is Matthew 1:18-25**

<sup>18</sup> Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> *Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.* <sup>20</sup> But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." <sup>22</sup> All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup> "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." <sup>24</sup> *When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup> but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.*

**The Message is entitled *Love Flows***

This fourth Sunday of Advent we set ablaze the candle of love. Yet, what do we mean by the word love? It is used in a wide variety of ways on a daily basis in our lives, even by

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advertisers: In 2009, Apple sent an email ad promoting Valentine's Day giving. The tagline read: "The ultimate love note. Give an engraved iPod nano this Valentine's Day." Or more recently McDonald's "I'm Lovin' It" slogan and McDonald's Delivery campaign that drives home the fact that it "delivers what you love". Does one really love McDonald's food?

Of course, we all use the word love in a multitude of ways each day: I love ice cream. I love my children. I loved the movie I just saw. I love my pet. I love the church I belong to. I love my back yard. I love Christmas lights. I love my spouse. Love is a well-trodden word in our culture, so how can we reclaim it? As another psalmist said, "How can we taste and see," that is, understand love in a new way this Fourth Sunday of Advent?

Rev. Angel Kyodo Williams, a Zen priest, offers us a new way to taste and see love, for she says: "Love is space. [Love] is developing our own capacity for spaciousness within ourselves to allow others to be as they are. That is love."

"Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child." Joseph had a decision to make. Mary had made a commitment to Joseph and from his vantage point, it's clear that Mary had nullified her commitment. She was with child. Can you imagine being in Joseph's sandals? The woman you planned to marry has turned up pregnant and you know for sure that you are not the father of the child she is carrying! I can imagine a range of emotional responses by Joseph.

Yet, what I find amazing about Joseph's story is that even before an angel showed up in his dream he had decided to make space for Mary. He had the capacity for spaciousness given his faith in God. The text tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, which allowed him to give Mary the grace to be as she was. Joseph didn't respond with anger or rage. Joseph didn't seek humiliation, retribution or even death for Mary. No, Joseph made gracious space for Mary, deciding to dismiss her quietly for he was unwilling to expose her to public shame. Williams would name Joseph's action love.

Williams continues her thoughts about love, saying, "That doesn't mean that we don't have hopes or wishes that things are changed or shifted, but that to come from a place of love is to be in acceptance of what is, even in the face of moving it towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all of us."

Joseph had decided, but he slept on his decision before acting on it. And during his sleep an angel of Lord appeared to him and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Joseph had the capacity for spaciousness, because he came from a place of love, sourced by God alone. Joseph was able to hear and respond to the words of the angel from his place of love for he took Mary to be his wife. Even though he may not have fully understood, Joseph accepted a future moving Mary and him towards a greater wholeness not just for themselves but for all people. This is love according to Williams.

Now we all know that Joseph doesn't often get much press during Advent and Christmas, as with almost all births the focus is on the mother and child. I know this intimately this Advent Season, as my son awaits the birth of his first child. He stands in the shadows of his wife and future child, for they have first billing, just like Mary and baby Jesus did. We know that

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Mary's yes, "Let it be with me according to your word," is certainly instrumental to our story. But, so is Joseph's yes. Without Joseph's willingness, without his capacity for spaciousness which allowed Mary to be as she was, our story would have been dramatically different.

I suggest that Joseph helps us taste and see in a new way what love really looks like. Joseph helps us plumb the depth of God's lived love in ordinary people like you and me. God's restorative love at work within us helps us be gracious to others by making space for them.

Think about this for your own life and those you encounter daily. Do you make space for others? Who among us might need more space to be as they are? How might we be more gracious to others? How might an angel of Lord be calling you to move towards something that is more whole, more just, more spacious for all people." Through Joseph's story we are asked to reflect on our own capacity of spaciousness this morning and that will take humility on our part. Humility, because maybe we just don't see the whole picture or we don't have all the right answers. Humility, for God's ways are not always our ways.

Joseph set aside his deeply held convictions, for his righteousness would not have been tarnished had he dismissed Mary. Joseph humbly set aside his plans and stepped into God's new thing even though he didn't fully understand it, especially since it was a choice that ran counter to common wisdom, cultural norms and religious rules. Joseph humbly trusted that God was at work even though he was reeling from the loss of his imagined future. Joseph's capacity for spaciousness was fueled by his humble willingness to cooperate with the Spirit of God at work in both Mary and him. What about us?

Are we willing to humbly cooperate with the Spirit of God? Possibly, but often fear of "What could this mean" if we cooperate with God takes hold. We fear what is not known. What God asks of us at times in our lives. That is why I believe that the angel had to say to Joseph, "Do not be afraid!" Joseph, do not be afraid of the Holy Spirit knitting together new life in Mary. Do not be afraid of this child who will save all people from their sin. Do not be afraid of what others might whisper in the shadows about you or Mary or the child. Do not be afraid even though God's new plan runs counter to previous divine commands. Joseph was being asked to jettison what he fervently believed was the right and faithful thing to do and step into the new thing that God was doing," writes commentator Jill Duffield. This took humility, courage and trust in the God whom he worshipped. Joseph took a leap of faith, trusting that God would give him wings.

Now I want to be clear that I don't believe any of us can simply manufacturer or will our way to a greater capacity of spaciousness. Our capacity is sheer gift from God. Yet, it is a gift that is not unwrapped without humility. Without humility we will think of ourselves more highly than we ought. We will believe our ways are right over and above anyone else, even God's. Without humility, I doubt that we will be able to hear angels speak. I hear echoes of the psalmist say to God, "*Let your face shine, that we may be saved*" and I will add the phrase "from ourselves." We are created for connection, with the divine and with others. Yet, we often fight against the very connections that will bring us life abundant. We don't make room for God's restorative love and in turn we don't know how to make room for others. Can you begin to taste and see the beauty of Williams' definition of love that "Love is space"?

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Can you see the beauty of walking alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome? Can you see the beauty of making space for other people, as we open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgement and control?

This morning I think of those I have personally met or know through their stories who exemplify love is space. Those who knew themselves to be loved by God and in turn let love flow through them. Those whose capacity for spaciousness allowed them to humbly set aside their plans and ways to make room for others to be as they are.

This morning I share Gayle Knight's story. She is the founder of a non-profit that turns despair into H.O.P.E. in Garden Grove, California. Gayle began by making space in her busy escrow business schedule for one single mom and her children. She soon was helping others out of the trunk of her car. Then in retirement Gayle, without remuneration, has given twenty-two years of her time, energy and love to women and children. Today, H.O.P.E. is a one-stop safety net providing basic needs, youth mentoring, community service education and programs to help women succeed. Gayle's capacity of spaciousness is fueled by God's restorative love, for she is deeply immersed in a faith community that nurtures and encourages her amazing ministry. Gayle would be quick to confess that God's face shines upon her, as she knows that she can do nothing apart from God.

When I reflect on Gayle and the non-profit she felt called to create, it is obvious that she humbly cooperated with the Spirit of God. She set aside all else and devoted her life to making space for others and lives have been dramatically changed. Gayle said yes to making space for one woman and her children, and like Joseph, she welcomed a future that she did not fully understand.

What about us? Are we willing to trust God enough to make space for others in our lives, even though we don't know where doing so might lead us? You might remember that in November, as we made our commitments to this church for 2020, we were all challenged to make space for a new relationship. To make room in our lives to meet someone we do not yet know in this congregation or in our community around us. I know when I made room to get to know Gayle I had no idea that I would end up on her Board, yet my life was enriched by doing so. I am sure we all have stories of risking new relationships that have taken our lives in new direction and enriched us.

We hear from scripture that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." When we humbly abide in God's love, God's love will flow through us and create within us a capacity of spaciousness for others.

So, I ask you this morning, are you listening for the stirring of the Spirit within you? Has an angel visited you in a dream? Are you open to opportunities that would allow God's love to flow through you to bless others?

In the hours and days ahead, as we wait for the babe to be born and placed in a manger, listen for the prompting of the Spirit and make space for others in love, for when love flows through us we draw others to the restorative well of God's love made most fully known to us through the babe in a manger. Immanuel, God is indeed with us. Amen.