

“Incarnate Love”

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Based upon Luke 1:39-56; 1 John 4:7-16

This past week, as we have moved closer and closer to Christmas, TV programming has been like an Advent calendar with pockets filled with every conceivable Christmas movie ever made. Most of the movies are by Hallmark, or include Bing Crosby, Chevy Chase, or Tim Allen. But one popular film, called *Love Actually*, has also appeared multiples times, notwithstanding the fact that it doesn't satisfy any of that criteria.¹ *Love Actually* illustrates multiple kinds of love by telling the stories of multiple kinds of relationships. It is one of those movies that people tend either to adore or loathe. My reaction falls somewhere in between. I enjoy many of the story lines, but also wish that some of the more ridiculous ones had been left out. This time of year, however, I usually watch the movie through at least once, if for no other reason than to be able to see the end. The last minute of the movie is by far the best, in my opinion, even though it doesn't include any of the stars in the movie, or any dialogue. It is a scene which shows us what love actually looks like in a unique and powerful way. It won't spoil the film for you to see it, so let's watch: **[Video clip of the end of the movie shown of people hugging loved ones at the airport.]**² I love this scene because it is a beautiful reminder that love has the power to turn ordinary people into rock stars in others' eyes, and can transform the hearts and lives of anyone regardless of gender, ethnicity, or age. When people come together at the airport after having been separated from their loved ones, there is so much joy. It renews my faith in the human race to see so much love expressed by so many different types of people.

The scene in today's gospel lesson affects me the same way, but for different reasons. No sooner does Mary receive the news from the angel Gabriel that she is going to bear the savior of the world, than she goes with haste to find her relative Elizabeth, who experienced a miracle of her own six months earlier in the conception of her as-yet unborn baby, John. According to the previous section of Chapter 1, Elizabeth had been in seclusion for five months. Maybe this was because she was tired of the gawkers and well-wishers, or because at her age she felt it was a high-risk pregnancy, or because she was trying to protect her holy baby from danger. We don't know. But after five months of living alone with a husband who had been stricken dumb by an angel, Elizabeth was ready for some company. So, when Mary came running up to her, interrupting her isolation with the news of her own miracle, it was like a 1st-Century, hill country equivalent of an airport reunion of blessed women. Mary could see that Elizabeth was indeed pregnant as Gabriel has said she would be, and Elizabeth could tell that Mary was now carrying the world's savior because John leapt in her womb as if recognized Jesus *in utero*. “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” Elizabeth cried out, which, according to Luke, then inspired Mary to sing about her own blessing too, in a prophetic and proleptic pronouncement known as the “*Magnificat*.” There was love everywhere, inside and out in that moment.

¹ *Love Actually*, film written and directed by Richard Curtis, starring Colin Firth, Hugh Grant, Liam Neeson, Alan Rickman, Emma Thompson, and others, (Working Title Films, 2003).

² See *Love Actually Ending*, posted by happyhappyman2k Dec. 20, 2008 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iEQPXDGRaEk>.

Why did Mary run to see Elizabeth after Gabriel left her instead of Joseph? Some commentators insist that it must have been to confirm that what Gabriel said was true, although in the birth narrative, Zechariah and Joseph are the ones who express doubts, not Mary or Elizabeth. Thus, Elizabeth notes immediately after Mary arrives, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” I think Mary ran to Elizabeth not because she doubted, but because she believed Gabriel. She also ran because in addition to being a relative who could care for her during a time when Mary’s own townspeople might have wanted to stone her to death, Elizabeth was also the only person Mary knew who could even begin to fathom what it was like to have an angel show up out of the blue with a divine commission, and the news that one was going to be the bearer of a miraculous servant of God. Sometimes you need more than a sympathetic ear, you know? Sometimes you need to be with someone who truly understands from experience what you are experiencing.

Elizabeth knew what it felt like to be commissioned by God to carry a special holy child. But she also knew that Mary’s child was very different from her own. Jesus was going to be more than a prophet for God. Jesus was God in human flesh. “And why has this happened to me,” Elizabeth said, “that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” In the Greek Orthodox tradition, Mary is called “*Theotokos*,” which means “God-bearer,” for just this reason. She was carrying God Incarnate. But reading this text, as I did this week, so soon after seeing the end of *Love Actually*, it struck me that there are really two kinds of incarnations celebrated in this text. Like Elizabeth, we tend in Advent to focus on the first one, the incarnation of God in Jesus. But there is another kind of incarnation in this story that we need to remember as much as the first if we are to receive fully the gift of Christ Emmanuel that we celebrate at Christmastime; it is the incarnation of God in the love between these two women.

John tries to explain this second kind of incarnation in today’s text from his first epistle. “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him,” he writes. “God is love.... No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and is perfected in us.” In other words, when we love one another, God becomes enfleshed in us. We become God’s love incarnate, or God’s love actually if you prefer.

That sounds almost like a heretical statement at first. Surely there has only ever been one Incarnation, the incarnation of God in Christ! He alone was fully human and divine. He alone was God Emmanuel, God with us. But when I say that we can be love incarnate, and therefore God incarnate too, I am not saying that we can become divine as Jesus was divine. I’m not saying that we can acquire the knowledge or power of God either. What I’m saying, because John said first, is that when we love as God loves us in Christ, we have the ability to make God real for others. We have the ability to make the good news of Christmas real.

Does it feel real to you? Pastors ask this question all the time at Easter because the Resurrection is so far outside of anyone’s experience and far beyond anything that science can explain. But the Incarnation is equally hard for some people to believe. The problem isn’t so much that they cannot imagine how God could have become human, or do not understand the

doctrine. They can and do. They want to believe. But believing and experiencing are two different things, and if Christ was and is God-Emmanuel, God with us, then why isn't there more palpable and visible evidence that God is here? If God is here, why do people suffer? If God is here, why are there still wars? We can decorate our houses with lights and greens to mask the darkness, stuff ourselves with sugar to give ourselves a short-term happy buzz, and distract ourselves with gifts of things the advertisers swear will make our lives better. But we know that God's not in all that stuff. What we really want at Christmas and the rest of the year is Jesus, enfleshed, loving us here.

Did you see the funny video that's been circulating this week of the children's Christmas pageant in which one of the lambs stole baby Jesus?³ Three little toddler lambs were all curled up around the manger with a loving 5-year-old Mary looking on. Then one of the lambs focused on the fact that baby Jesus was right in front of her in the straw. So, still in her lamb costume, she picked up the baby, walked out of the barn onto the chancel steps, and began holding and rocking him just like a mother with a newborn. As the congregation started to laugh and buzz, a whole host of feelings danced across Mary's face. She went from showing maternal bliss, to bewilderment, to mama-bear rage. "This wasn't in the script. Huh? Hey, wait a minute, that's my baby!" her face said. So, she got up and took the doll out of the arms of the lamb and put it back in the manger. But the lamb wasn't content to relinquish Jesus that easily. She grabbed the doll again and began rocking it. Not surprisingly, the whole pageant fell apart from there. When I first saw the clip, I couldn't help thinking that it was a perfect, albeit inadvertent, illustration of the dysfunction of the Church universal, in that it was Christians fighting over who gets to hold Jesus and claim him as their own.

But when you think about it, the yearning that was in that little lamb's heart is really in all of our hearts. We aren't trying to be selfish or greedy. We just all want to experience Love incarnate, to know that Jesus was and is real and that God is truly with us, and the truth is we don't all feel it. So how do we make the Incarnation which Christmas celebrates real without stealing people's baby Jesuses? John's advice to his readers, who also lived after Christ had died and was raised, and therefore struggled with the same issues, was to remind them that we all can hold the baby. We all can bear the baby too like Mary did because the baby who is God is also love.

What this means is that when we are searching for God in our lives, mourning the fact that we have never seen either a burning bush or a guiding star, we need to keep in mind that it isn't a lesser thing to experience God through another person's experience. We aren't settling for an inadequate, second-best kind of love if we experience God's love through the love of family and friends and church members. The love we share in those moments is God with us because human incarnation is the main way that God reaches out to humanity. The love which replicates itself again and again around the world like in the movie, is the proof that Christ was and is real. Anthony de Mello put it this way: "We forget all too easily that one of the big lessons of the

³ See "Sheep, Mary tussle over baby Jesus in children's pageant gone hilariously awry," ABC Television Stations, published Dec 15, 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2PP1Ey3NEk>

Incarnation is that God is found in the ordinary. You wish to see God? Look at the face of the man next to you. You want to hear him? Listen to the cry of a baby, the loud laughter at a party.... You want to feel him? Stretch your hand out and hold someone.”⁴

Now I wouldn't go quite as far as de Mello goes, as far as to say that to experience any human being in any context is to experience God, because even though we all are made in the image of God according to Scripture, to go that far seems to me to be confusing the creature with the Creator a bit. But I do believe that his basic point, that God can be and is incarnate in us is true. We experience God most and best when we love another as Christ loves us, in a self-giving, compassionate, generous way. When we give of ourselves as Christ gave of himself, when we cherish those around us instead of judging them, and help them because we cherish them, there, in those moments, God is most present. This kind of self-giving love is called *agape* in the Bible. It's not the same as *Eros*, romantic love, or even *philos*, brotherly love. It is holier and more selfless than both. John argues that we all have the ability to be “*Agape-tokos*,” love bearers; that ability is God's image in us. It is also Christ in us. We have only to let God's love dwell in us, and we have the power.

Who do you turn to, when you like Mary, are bursting with the experience of God and want to share it with someone else who has felt the same thing? Who do you turn to when you are filled with doubts and fears and want the assurance that God is real? I bet most of you here, if not all of us, know at least one Love-bearer whom you seek instinctively, whether you know you are seeking God in that moment or not. I also believe that at different stages of our lives and on different places on our journey of faith, God allows us to play both Mary and Elizabeth. We get to be the ones who carry God's love for others, and we get to be the ones who affirm God's presence in others. Both roles are valuable and essential, and both are about wrapping flesh around God's love so that the transforming power of God's grace in Christ becomes real. But some of us may find ourselves in one role more than the other, I think. That's why we need to come together as the Church. This is our airport, our hilltop reunion. Here we draw strength from those who know from their own personal experience as Mary did, that God's promises are real, and here we love others who have not yet felt the stirring within them, so that we and they both can discover the God within.

In her book, [An Altar in the World](#), Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: “In an age of information overload, when a vast variety of media delivers news faster than most of us can digest—when many of us have at least two e-mail addresses, two telephone numbers, and one fax number—the last thing any of us needs is more information about God. We need the practice of incarnation, by which God saves the lives of those whose intellectual assent has turned as dry as dust, who have run frighteningly low on the bread of life, who are dying to know more God in their bodies. Not more about God. More God.”⁵ On this 4th Sunday of Advent, we celebrate along with Elizabeth and Mary, the Incarnation which was God enfleshed in Jesus. We also recognize that God can and does dwell within us too. Rejoice in the good news of this truth this Christmas,

⁴ De Mello, Anthony, [Sadhana: A Way to God: Christian Exercises in Easter Form](#) (New York: Image Books, 1984), 46.

⁵ Taylor, Barbara Brown, [An Altar in the World](#) (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 45.

especially if you are yearning for more of God, not to know more about God. “If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” Blessed are all the God-bearers, for they magnify the love who is our Lord. Amen.