

Songs of Love
Philippians 1:3-11
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2 December 2018

As a nice transition from one holiday season to the next, our reading today from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi begins with thanksgiving. As teacher and preacher Fred Craddock points out, "To begin with a word of thanksgiving was not unusual for any correspondent of that day, but for Paul it was theologically central and essential."

So hear now the word of the Lord from this ancient letter:

Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,

Thanks be to God.

The day of Christ is coming, Paul declares. Time to prepare.

I imagine that many of you are caught up in the midst of your preparations for the coming of Christmas. Today I'm here to remind you not to forget one vital aspect of that preparation—to let your love overflow.

Because the Christian story is fundamentally a love story.
The theologian James McClendon tells the story this way:

God who is the very Ground of Adventure, the Weaver of society's Web, the Holy Source of nature in its concreteness—the one and only God, who, when time began, began to be God for a world that in its orderly constitution finally came by his will and choice to include also—ourselves.

We human beings, having our natural frame and basis, with our own penchant for community, and our own hankering after adventure, found ourselves, before long, in trouble. Our very adventurousness led us astray

In [God's] loving concern, God set among us, by every means infinite wisdom could propose, the foundations of a new human society; in his patience he sent messengers to recall the people of his Way to their way; in the first bright glimmers of opportunity he sent—himself, incognito, without splendor and fanfare, the Maker amid the things made, the fundamental Web as if a single fiber, the Ground of Adventure risking everything in this adventure.

[God's] purpose—sheer love; [God's] means—pure faith; [God's] promise—unquenchable hope. In that love he lived a life of love; by that faith he died a faithful death; from that death he rose to fructify hope for the people of his Way, newly gathered, newly equipped. The rest of the story is still [God's]—yet it can be ours, yours.

And how did the God of love come among us? Incognito in that little peasant baby whose birth we await a few weeks from now. The familiarity of this story often masks precisely how strange it is.

Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo reminds us by telling the story this way:

Behold the unalterable power of Love's being: now a single-celled zygote . . . now a free-floating blastocyst . . . now an embryo, fully implanted in the thick and marshy, nutrient-rich endometrial lining of a young peasant woman in ancient Palestine. The fused cells of Love-incarnate "push long, amoeba-like fingers deep into the uterine lining while secreting digestive enzymes that facilitate its burial. In response, the tips of the spiral arteries break open and spurt like geysers. Thus, life begins in a pool of blood." The incarnate life of divine love begins in a pool of blood—life-giving blood that nourishes the progression of Mary's pregnancy through neurogenesis, musculoskeletal somitogenesis, organogenesis, replete with "cellular migrations worthy of Odysseus." The bloodiness of this second Genesis makes the life of Mary's child possible—a recreation not from nothing, but from *everything*, from the universal stuff of life. . . .

Love incarnate did not pass into the world through Mary's womb like a ray of light. Rather, the hard-as-steel muscles of Mary's uterus pressed the baby's head down on her cervix until it slowly, painfully dilated and effaced and made way for the child to gradually inch his way through the birth canal with each grueling push, his bruised and

misshapen head finally emerging through the stretching, tearing perineum into the hands of Mary's birthing attendant.

Elizabeth Gandolfo asks, "How can it be that the invulnerable can at once become vulnerable, that the vulnerable can bear the image of invulnerability?"

And her narration of this love story reminds us that we all made the same adventurous journeys through our mother's wombs. We all were overwhelming invulnerable and only survived and thrived because someone else risked themselves to love us.

Do each of us, then, incarnate in some way the invulnerable love of God in our very vulnerability?

"There is a special moral intensity to the love between parents and children," writes philosopher Allison Gopnik. She continues, "Just deciding to care for this one particular special, individual child automatically makes that child the focus of our deepest moral concern. Parents routinely sacrifice their sleep, their time, their happiness, even their lives for their children."

She adds, "The immediate, intimate, loving interactions between babies and adults dissolve the boundaries between the self and others." And so she concludes that the origin of our ethical traditions resides here, in the love we have for children. This is how we learn to be moral beings.

But it is also how we learn everything. Gopnik declares, "Because we love babies, they can learn." Because we care for them, they have the ability to focus their energies on learning and they learn so quickly because of our care for them. And the more love they receive, the stronger the attachment and the affection, the greater ability they have to let their imaginations thrive and through this imaginative capacity, they learn to make sense of the world.

So the greatest human gift you were given was by those adults who loved you and cared for you when you were at your most vulnerable. That the adult you can dream and imagine and hope and learn and seek the truth and live an ethical life all is because someone overflowed with unconditional love for little baby you.

Yes, we are each an incarnation of divine love.

This Advent, let your love overflow. Make loving one another a vital aspect of your preparation for this season. And not just a sentimental emotion, but the kind that risks the adventure, that creates new opportunities for life to thrive.

And in that way we will sing our love songs for the coming of the Day of Christ.