



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

December 20, 2020

Godly Encounters

Rev. Louise Rogers

Godly Encounters

Rev. Louise Rogers

© 2020 by Rev. Louise Rogers and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any
electronic or mechanical means including information storage and
retrieval systems,
without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: January 6, 2021

Romans 16:25-27

Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever! Amen.

Luke 1:26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Today is the Sunday of Love, the Gift of God. The World desperately needs love. To hear us talk about it we are pretty much experts on love. We say, “I love my dog? I love this dessert, I love my family.” How do we know when we encounter divine love? God’s gift of love includes and moves beyond emotion to provide a deeper and transformational experience. What is marvelous, are the ways God brings love to us.

A few years ago, at a church where I was serving, the Hilltop fellowship was having a Christmas lunch. All the participants were to bring in a meaningful Christmas item from their home to share. The Fellowship Hall was decorated with Christmas red and green tablecloths on the tables. A special table had been put out to collect the Christmas items. Some people brought in ornaments or creche scenes to put on the table. One woman had a vest crouched by her Aunt Doris, and a tall Santa, wearing waders, had quite a back story. Ed Dubbs arrived with two brown paper sacks. Ed did not typically attend the Hilltop Fellowship, so everyone made a fuss over him. “Ed, do you want to put your Christmas item on the special display table”, Annie asked? “No, I’ll keep this with me,” he said quickly. Then he took his place at the table.

After lunch, the sharing time began. We heard the story about each precious item. Finally, Ed’s turn came. He slowly lifted himself from his chair. “When I was a boy, we lived on the South Side, me, my younger broth and my parents. My dad worked at the J&L mill. We didn’t have any money at all. Every day my dad would leave early to work his shift. Our place

was so close to the mill that when they tapped the furnace you could feel the heat in our small place. We could see the glow from the steel. In December, Dad called my brother and me over and he said ‘look boys, times are hard and there aren’t going to be any Christmas presents this year. You should know.’ There was nothing to say, we knew he was trying. On Christmas Eve we went to bed knowing that the next day would be like all the rest. When we woke up and went out to the main room there were no presents under the tree. We didn’t even have a tree of our own. When I turned to the kitchen, there sat on the table an orange for each of us. Dad had talked to the grocer and even worked a bit longer at the mill to get money so we could get this orange. Never have I seen anything so wonderful. We ate that orange slowly so it lasted all day.” With that Ed pulled out an orange from his sack. He said, “this is what love is all about.”

No one said a word. We were all transfixed by the story Ed had told us. The other Christmas gifts on the table still looked pretty, decorated in red and green for Christmas but that orange glowed for us with the spirit of God’s sacrificial love. Christmas is the story of God’s sacrificial love in sending his son, Jesus to be with us. Knowing that we need to be loved concretely, Jesus comes to show us how to live with God’s ways of love. The baby Jesus grows up, teaches us how to live and carries love to the cross to save us from our sins. The kingdom of God’s love arrives unexpectedly as a baby, but perfectly in the fullness of time.

All of this began when Mary stood before the angel Gabriel! “Greetings favored one. The Lord is with you”

In calling Mary, God's reveals his greatness through his love, through his grace. This humble setting alerts us to the fact that God often works in strange ways. God goes to great lengths to include the humblest people of the world. God may be the God of the universe, but God is no elitist.

God's ways show that

- God chooses the simple to confound the wise.
- God chooses the humble to shame the strong.
- God always chooses the ordinary to do something extraordinary.

The way of God's love is so strong that we can believe, what is impossible for us is possible for God. As we hear the Christmas account. Each person encounters God in their own way. The love that "bears all things, hopes all things, believes all things and endures all things." Here the revelation of the mystery was revealed. The promise of the prophets was revealed in Jesus. The glimpse of love grew and grew to fulfill the promise that still amazes with joy. Christmas, for us, twenty-plus centuries later, is no different.

If we embrace the Good News, if we seek the voice of the One who calls us, there is encouragement for us--you have found favor with God--but there is also a growing edge, and that is to put love into action and mirror the very nature of God:

- to forgive,
- to bless
- to make God's name Holy
- to be merciful

- to be reverent
- to put away pride
- to place our leadership under the ways of God
- to remember that God is on the side of the oppressed
- to feed the hungry
- to serve, and
- to do all of this in remembrance of him

So, what is God revealing to you this Christmas? And what are you saying to God?

Thank you, God, for your amazing and unexpected love!



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org