

"I Will Listen"

Rev. David Gregory

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Advent 4



Readings

Old Friends

Freya Manfred

Old friends are a steady spring rain,
or late summer sunshine edging into fall,
or frosted leaves along a snowy path –
a voice for all seasons saying, I know you.
The older I grow, the more I fear I'll lose my old friends,
as if too many years have scrolled by
since the day we sprang forth, seeking each other.

Old friend, I knew you before we met.
I saw you at the window of my soul –
I heard you in the steady millstone of my heart
grinding grain for our daily bread.
You are sedimentary, rock-solid cousin earth,
where I stand firmly, astonished by your grace and truth.
And gratitude comes to me and says:

"Tell me anything and I will listen.
Ask me anything, and I will answer you."

Luke 1:39-45

from the New Revised Standard Version

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Just like that, we are at the fourth Sunday of Advent. Before another Sunday arrives, Christmas will have come and gone, and a week after that, we'll be embarking on the journey of a new year, whose destination has yet to unfold. That nebulous destination has us all a little anxious, and we have felt it this week as so many of our friends in New York whose livelihoods depend on Broadway and larger entertainment venues are suddenly prevented from moving forward once again.

For two weeks in June we gathered maskless in these rooms before Delta changed our course. Now Omicron is here, and we're hoping for the best, doing our best, finding ways to live in community with whatever restrictions we find ourselves in. We plan to gather here on Christmas Eve and find a common source of hope, peace, joy, and love, and today it's the message of that last one, LOVE, that calls to us forward.

Love, in the Christian tradition, has often become a theological proposition, and that is understandable since the text of scripture makes it clear: God is Love. Thousands of volumes have been written and countless sermons preached on that idea. Today's gospel lesson, however, brings love into a realm that is more clearly and easily manifested – the realm of feeling and experience, the kind that you and I can experience every day. When we say "God is Love" at the same time we're thinking of God as existing in some far-off heaven, it's pretty hard to feel the love. But when we speak of God being *here*, incarnate, not only in Jesus, but in you and me, in the birds and the trees, the sky and the ocean, in our children, in our pets, in our closest friends, and even in our not so close friends, when Love is here, God is here. It's pretty simple if we can allow it in. And that's what this candle signifies today: Allowing love in.

Mary and Elizabeth are a perfect example of letting in God's love. In the Nativity story, we are told that they are cousins in unusual circumstances, especially given their times. This story is all about the women in a narrative that usually revolves around the men: two expectant women in a room together exuding a vibrational energy that we can still feel after two thousand years. That is some big energy! There is joy in their meeting and greeting. These two women have a history, and the children within them have a destiny, and this time together provides an energetic nexus for the entirety of the Good News to unfold. There is a momentum here that refuses to be interrupted, and I'd say it comes not from some theological proposition that the church has put forward over the centuries, but instead it resides in the relationship of these two women and the sons that they carry. One is John the Baptizer, and the other Jesus of Nazareth.

We've always been clear about this in our community. We've never been here to answer all the questions, or to tell each other (let alone the world) what we should or should not believe about this person we call Jesus. Even our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is united only in the quest for this kind of exploration. The simple teaching that forms our bedrock is that we love one another as we have been loved, that we treat each other and others outside of these walls in all the ways we would want to be treated, that we be tenderhearted, forgiving, compassionate, and loving toward other people, toward creatures, toward the very earth itself. This is probably the limit of our proposition here.

Love expressed in this way is *experiential* in nature, and because of that, it has the opportunity to be practiced energetically and to manifest something like these leaps of joy that thrill us from the ancient story. And we need not be physically gestational to be consumed with this joyful, loving, creative energy in the presence of others, particularly these old friends who know us well and love us anyway without condition, without expectation, and without judgment. Divine Spirit is alive and well in those around us – most pronounced in our significant friendships, and most recognizable after a period of absence.

The beautiful poem “Old Friends” is found in this year’s Advent Reader, contributed by Jolyn O’Hare, and it captures the feeling of this gospel lesson and brings it alive for me in ways that I have never experienced before.

*Old friends are a steady spring rain,
or late summer sunshine edging into fall,
or frosted leaves along a snowy path –
a voice for all seasons saying, I know you.*

Most of us can sit here today and put a face on those phrases. We can picture a friend who might be a new friend or an old friend or something in between, one who feels as welcoming and comforting as that steady spring rain, or the late summer sunshine. We could sit around a fire and tell our friendship stories, and they would come alive for us because at one time or another we’ve all been there. We’ve been in the presence of someone who instantly understands, easily loves, and automatically forgives us. They weep with us when we weep, and they feel joy in our joys, and with little or no effort at all, they stay with us through the years, not because we see them or speak with them all the time, but because they and we have the ability to simply pick up where we left off without any expectations or hoops to jump through. Jesus had many such friends in his short life. Lazarus comes to mind, along with his sisters Martha and Mary. Jesus apparently knew them well and visited them often in a village called Bethany. He enjoyed their hospitality, wept with them in their sorrows, and celebrated their joys.

I’d like for us today to grasp one very simple idea, that an old friend is a conduit of the Divine. In other words, there is this Divine Friend who dwells within us. Don’t let the theological term “Holy Spirit” distract you from the experience of it. The New Testament teaches that our bodies are the dwelling places of that Spirit. In the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, Paul says that God’s Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we belong to God. This is an ancient expression of something that remains active in us for eternity. It’s a way of saying that spirit recognizes that which is like itself. When Mary stepped into her cousin’s house that day, it was instant fireworks.

*You are sedimentary, rock-solid cousin earth,
where I stand firmly, astonished by your grace and truth.
And gratitude comes to me and says:
“Tell me anything and I will listen.
Ask me anything, and I will answer you.”*

This candle of Love today is in honor and recognition of our Divine Friend, who comes to us in many forms, but especially in the form of an “Old Friend.” Enjoy the reunion today. Enjoy the reunification of body, soul, and spirit. Let this be a season of oneness, and maybe reach out to someone you haven’t heard from in a long, long time, and pick it up where you left off. This is Holy Love.