

“You Aren’t What Others Say About You”

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

This is The Fourth Sunday of Advent and we light the Love Candle. The Third Sunday of Advent the Joy Candle was lit. The Second Sunday of Advent, the Peace Candle was lit. Three weeks ago, The First Sunday of Advent, the Hope Candle was lit. Today, the Love Candle represents the love of God that guarantees the hope, peace and joy of God is yours to experience and give away to others, even those who may speak negatively about you and even disparage your reputation. The story of Advent reminds you that Jesus is with you, because the greatest act of God’s love toward humanity came to live among us and show us the way. Yes, the birth of Jesus.

God is love. Love is God. Believing that Jesus was born of a Virgin, out of wedlock, in a filthy stable to parents who were mocked and ridiculed matters for living as one who is beloved of God. Chris Armstrong writes,

.... when my parents tried to impress on my two brothers and me the importance and the intricacies of Advent observance, I could hardly keep from rolling my eyes.... the historical niceties of an ancient liturgical season seemed well irrelevant.

What is this thing called Advent?

.... in 4th- and 5th-century Gaul and Spain, Advent was a preparation not for Christmas but for Epiphany. That’s the early-January celebration of such diverse events in Jesus’ life as his Baptism, the miracle at Cana, and the visit of the Magi.... believers spent Advent’s 40 days examining their hearts and doing penance.

It was not until the 6th century that Christians in Rome began linking this season explicitly to the coming of Christ. But at that time, and for centuries after, the

“coming” that was celebrated was not the birth of Jesus, but his Second Coming. It was not until the Middle Ages that the church began using the Advent season to prepare to celebrate Christ’s birth.

.... So, the modern liturgy divides Advent into a period, through December 16th, during which the focus is Christ’s Second Coming, and a period, from December 17th to the 24th, focusing on his birth.

.... I can respond as I imagine believers have done on every Advent since the tradition began: I can bow my head and prepare my heart to receive the One who is always present, but who seems distant in the busyness of the season. I can mourn for my hardness of heart. I can hope in his grace. And I can rejoice that in answer to the cry, “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” he came.... I’m not rolling my eyes any more.¹

During Advent we can be intentional about receiving the One who is always present, but often ignored during the busyness of everyday life. You can receive the One whose words tell you who you are. In this regard, Bobby Schuller, the pastor of Shepherd’s Grove Presbyterian Church in Irvine wrote *Creed of the Beloved*: “I’m not what I do. I’m not what I have. *I’m not what people say about me.* I am the beloved of God. It’s who I am. No one can take it from me. I don’t have to worry. I don’t have to hurry. I can trust my friend Jesus and share his love with the world.² You aren’t what others say about you. You are what Jesus says about you. You are the beloved of God.

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26, Romans 16:25-27 and Luke 1:26-38 announce that women and men are created and purposed by God to participate fully and equally in life and God’s mission, according to God’s words not those of a patriarchal system.

Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 proclaims that God is with us, always. And God’s promises assure us that we can reject the negative voices in the world telling us who we are. God’s

¹Chris Armstrong, “Advent: Close Encounters of a Liturgical Kind” in *Christian History* Issue #103, 2012.

²Bobby Schuller, *You Are Beloved* (Nashville, Tennessee: Nelson Books, 2018), 16.

words tell us who we are. Psalm 89:2 reads, “... your [God’s] steadfast love is established forever; your [God’s] faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.”

Romans 16:25-27 is a benediction. It is a call to believe that God strengthens us to live a life of doxology which will be remembered long after we have left this life.

Romans 16:25a, 26c and 27c reads, “God... is able to strengthen you... to bring about the obedience of faith... to the glory of God.”

Luke 1:26-38 reinforces that women have never been considered unequal to men by God. Many men do believe that the female gender is lesser than the male gender, but not God. Mary is not wimpish or blindly obedient. She was not coerced to bear Jesus. Mary asks serious and perhaps even confrontative questions of the angel. At the end of her query and reflection, Mary does not say yes to God because she had to, but because she wanted to. Mary did not lose herself or her identity. In fact she became more fully who God created her to be by not “caving” to first century societal pressures and cultural norms. A patriarchal system, deeply rooted in male superiority, did not stop Mary from being strong, courageous, obedient and defiant. Luke 1:38 reads, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”³

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we lit the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love Candles on the Advent wreath, lifting up the Love Candle. You aren’t what others say about you. You are a child of God. You are the beloved of God. God’s words say so. Jesus gathers you into the family. Jesus defines you as a family member, not by gender, but as one

³In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of J. Clinton McCann Jr., Joel B. Green, Andrew Clark Whaley, Eric D. Barreto and Lynn Japinga in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2020), 56-59, 60-62, 62-63, 64-66, 66-67.

created in the *imago Dei*. You have equality as a family member with the gender that is different than yours. Again, Bobby Schuller writes, "...get rid of the words the world says to us and embrace the words our loving Father speaks over us. No word is more powerful than his [God's]. His [God's] word is final and it is good. In the end, it's all about identity (how you view yourself) and which words you will believe (what words you put your faith in)."⁴ Seize your belovedness. Women say no to gender inequality. Men say yes to gender equality. Everyone act with hope, peace, joy and love. Everyone be like "Mary." Love God. Love others. Show others their belovedness. Be Advent people every day. Amen.

*This sermon was preached (Livestream due to the Coronavirus) on Sunday, 20 December 2020,
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⁴Bobby Schuller, *You Are Beloved*, 97.