“Revolutionary Love”
Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55

*All you need is love ... Love is all you need.*

It’s hard to believe we just marked the fortieth anniversary of John Lennon’s untimely death. His Beatles’ song, *All You Need Is Love*, was released as a non-album single in 1967, but its unique instrumentation and syncopation give it an unforgettable sound. More important is the question of whether Lennon was right: Is it true that all you need is love?

We’ve made it to the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday we associate with the Angel who announced the news to Mary that she would be with child, and he would be the Son of God and the Savior of the world. After hope, peace and joy, we celebrate today the virtue of love and its relationship to the Christmas story.

The Christmas story is God’s love story with the world. But what does that mean? How do we know what that love is that is all we need?

I was talking about this with my daughter, Jillian, a few weeks ago. She was working on a paper for her theology class in seminary on the attributes of God. If God is love, how do we know what love is that defines God so completely? We could point to human love and then project it onto God, since we are created in God’s own image. We could then say God is the most perfect expression of human love. The problem is that we assume we know true love when we see it. And we often use the term love in ways that are more harmful than helpful.

For instance, we can talk about love in romantic terms. And that wouldn’t be wrong entirely, since God’s love includes God’s desire for intimate union with the world. But our notion of romantic love can be mushy and fickle. Can that hold up for God when our romantic love so often cools over time and under pressure? Or we might think of love as a faithful commitment that must be kept under any and all circumstances, like a marriage vow. But what happens when what we have called love becomes possessive, abusive or
even violent? How do we apply that distorted notion of love to God when we should rightly say that getting out of a dangerous and demeaning relationship is the more loving thing to do?

There has to be another way for us to learn about the love that is all we need, the love that God is. The Christmas story reveals the gospel truth about the character of God’s love and our call to live it. It starts by following the way God approaches Mary to receive God’s love and bear the Christ child, and it continues with Mary’s response that includes her Magnificat of revolutionary love. Instead of projecting love up from the human to the divine, we trace love down from the divine to the human. Only God’s love can bring a revolution to humanity that will save and keep us.

Luke’s Gospel tells the Christmas story as the story of the remaking of all creation. It shows how God set to redeeming and restoring the world through revolutionary love. If we want to know the love that is all we need then, we should start where Luke does—with Mary.

God sends an angel to bring the news to a young woman that God intends to give the world a new birth of freedom through her birthing a child. The coming of God to the world is as gentle and quiet and normal as the process of love that conceives and bears a child.

Think how extraordinary this is. The all-powerful God’s saving, revolutionary love comes not by the conquest of earth by a shock-and-awe campaign from heaven but by a loving partnership of heaven and earth that we see in the conception and birth of a child. Yes, there will be pain in the labor and delivery, but the whole picture here is of loving initiative and loving consent.

God saves the world by coming to it and living in it with us. When the angel answers Mary’s question about how this could be, the Holy Spirit is invoked as the agent of love that will bring it to pass. The word for spirit in Hebrew is the same word for breath. As in the breath of life. As in the breath God breathed into the lifeless form of Adam to make him a living being. God put God’s own enlivening breath into Mary, as God did with Adam.

We tend to make a lot of God’s saving act of love on the cross where Jesus died. But that part
of the story only makes sense with this part, which is God’s simple presence among us.

I’ve been reading a stunning book by a Sikh woman named Valarie Kaur. It’s titled, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love.* Sikhism is the world’s fifth largest religion, dating to the fifteenth century in India. It’s rooted in the ideas of God’s oneness and the equality of all people. Sikhs believe they must defend the weak and vulnerable at all costs. Men don’t cut their hair but tie it up under a turban as a sign of their devotion to God and as a signal that anyone can count on them when they need help.

You can imagine that after 9/11 Sikhs in America were easily confused for foreign terrorists. They were targeted by ignorant haters and told to go back to their country, even though most of them were born in the U.S. The worst moment was in Oak Creek, Wisconsin, August 5, 2012. A white nationalist named Wade Michael Page drove to a Sikh place of worship and began to shoot anyone he came upon with his 9mm handgun. The carnage was horrific. Six dead and four wounded. The grief of the Sikhs that followed was not just from the loss of life; it was from the loss of feeling safe in their own country from those who hated their otherness.

When the time for the funerals came, the community was disappointed that President Obama would not be coming. He had attended other services for the mass murders of Black Americans and others, but this time he planned to send Attorney General Eric Holder in his place. Obama had had to deal with being falsely labeled a Muslim all his presidency, and identification with Sikhs might reinforce that sentiment. But after an appeal to the White House, Michele Obama went. Her visit made a difference to the Sikhs. Her presence made them feel seen and validated their right to be here and receive justice. *Thank you for showing us your love,* Valarie told her.

Love that is love is love that is shown. And the way to show love is by showing up.

I have seen this as a pastor. For reasons that elude me, when I

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2 Ibid., p. 234.
show up in moments of crisis or grief, just my presence as the pastor—which people interpret as a representative of God—has a healing effect. So, when God actually shows up to the world in Jesus, that presence is a revolutionary love that can’t be stopped.

But notice also Mary’s participation. True love doesn’t overwhelm human agency; it enables it. *The Holy Spirit will overshadow you*, the angel tells Mary. Mary gains her voice and says, *Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*

Mary’s consent is a sign of God’s respect for her. God doesn’t mansplain to Mary or command her. God honors her and waits upon her. Love always increases a person’s agency rather than taking it away. Mary is given the power to choose. Turns out, God is pro-life by being pro-choice, don’t you know?! Mary becomes a free partner with God in this revolutionary love that redeems the world.

Soon after giving her consent, Mary is with her cousin Elizabeth when she launches into her song of praise. And notice what it entails: she sees God’s coming in Christ as the signal that the systems of oppression will be overthrown. She doesn’t see God’s presence in the world as a blessing of the status quo.

Love isn’t benign or passive. Love starts a revolution that confronts hate and inequalities and draws the world into a common experience of God’s mercy and goodness. But for that to happen, love has to confront evil and injustice. As Valarie Kaur puts it: *Civility is too often used to silence pain that requires people to change their lives.*

It’s not just a change of heart God seeks; it’s a change of everything that keeps everybody from knowing the full experience of God’s dream for the world.

Jeremy Courtney exemplifies revolutionary love. He and his wife, Jess, and children were sent by their Texas church to be missionaries to Turkey where they were to convert Muslims to Christianity and start churches. After about two years of abject failure, it was Jeremy who was converted when he realized the

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3 Ibid., p. 134.
problem was that he really didn’t love the people he went to witness to; he only saw them as objects for conversion.

Since then, they formed the Preemptive Love Coalition and have simply tried to live like Jesus in the presence of those who have experienced suffering and hardship due to the ravages of war in Iraq and Syria. They have been a loving presence in the midst of the worst of humanity. When it gets hard to love, especially enemies like ISIS, their motto is love anyway.⁴

As the Christian human rights advocate Van Jones puts it, *When it gets hard to love, love harder.* This is what we see in Mary and in the child of Mary, Jesus—a fierce love that never gives up loving anyway. This is God’s revolutionary love. This is the love that is all we need. Amen.