

**A Life in Bloom**

LOVE

December 15, 2019

**Isaiah 35: 1-10**

*<sup>1</sup> The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus <sup>2</sup> it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.*

*<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. <sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."*

*<sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; <sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; <sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. <sup>8</sup> A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. <sup>9</sup> No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. <sup>10</sup> And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

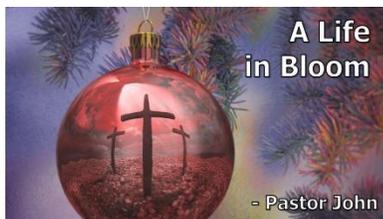
**Luke 1: 26-38**

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the*

house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> 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. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> 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.

### James 5: 7-8

<sup>7</sup> Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. <sup>8</sup> You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.



Welcome to the third week of Advent! We began this journey to salvation with a reminder that we have a pending invitation to find an altogether peace in Christ.

Last week we were called to cling to the tangible hope that Jesus brings not only during the Advent season, but throughout the year and throughout our journeys of faith, filling our lives with an “altogether hope”. Today we are called to live a life in bloom as we embrace an “altogether love” both in our personal faith and in our faith communities. Let us pray...

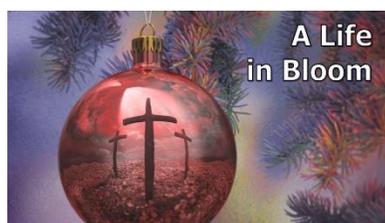
For many years I backpacked for a week each summer in the wilderness areas of Wyoming. Each time the adventure would begin in forest with lush greenery and rolling streams and tranquil lakes. Wildlife would be abundant – birds, squirrels, deer. As we would hike seemingly ever upward, though, the scenery would change. At about 9,000 feet of elevation you cross above what is called “tree line”. From that point on trees cannot survive the harsher climate. Life becomes sparser. With your backpack and small tent, you feel exposed to the big broad world. Tufts of grass and scrub bushes dot the landscape here and there, but it is really mostly dirt and rocks. There is a stillness and a sense of solitude that can set in. Life itself can feel tenuous. On the trails to this place or that you do see breath-taking scenery. Snow-covered mountain peaks are beautiful but very distant. And then you crest a ridge and suddenly there it is – a meadow filled with the most beautiful wildflowers. There, in the midst of this rugged and desolate beauty, you find the splendor of God’s creation. You gaze at the pure beauty and stand awe-struck. In your mind, you think, this is one reason why I came to this place.



As we ponder the sweep of Advent, we know there are stark and dry places. In last weeks' reading from Isaiah 11, we touched upon the desolation and despair experienced by Israel when they were defeated by the Babylonians and hauled off into captivity. But the prophet began to speak of hope in the dry places of their spiritual lives. There was a promise that hope would once again return to a people lost in despair. Like these flowers blooming in the rugged mountains, remember the shoot that rose from the stump? Jesus, the shoot, brings us both a living hope in this life and - as we heard from 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1 last Sunday and in our devotional study - Jesus also brings a future hope, an



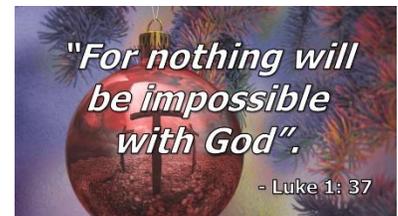
*"inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you"*. In today's reading from Isaiah 35, we get a glimpse of what God one day will do and of how God will make all things right and whole. If you are with me in Isaiah 35, we will be beginning on verse five. Starting there we read, *"the eyes of the blind shall be opened... the ears of the deaf unstopped... the lame shall leap like a deer... the tongue of the speechless sing for joy... waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert"*. The day of the Lord will be glorious! On that day the Lord's people will travel on the *"Holy Way"* as they return to Zion with singing, with *"everlasting joy upon their heads"*. It will be a glorious day indeed. In that day, yes, life will be bloom. True life will be in full bloom when we claim that imperishable, undefiled, unfading hope.



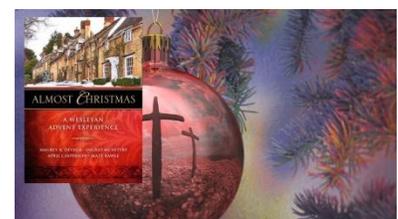
Turning now to Luke 1, we pick up another story of God's coming reign. This morning we join the birth story part way in. The angel has visited Zechariah,

informing him that he and Elizabeth will have a son. Because they were *"getting on in years"*, Zechariah doubted the angel's words. He was struck mute, unable

to speak. Elizabeth does conceive and rejoices that God has taken away her disgrace as he looked favorably upon her. Picking up the story today, the angel now comes to Mary. This visit begins as did the visit to Zechariah with the angel saying, *"Do not fear"*. Mary too has *"found favor with God"*. She too will conceive and bear a son. Luke connects into Isaiah's prophecies, connecting Jesus to the house of David and to a kingdom that will last forever. In verse 33 we read, *"and of his kingdom there will be no end"*. And then, suddenly, in verse 34, Mary hits the pause button. She questions, but in a different way than Zechariah had. He had doubt in his mind and heart. He questioned if God could really do what the angel had proclaimed. Mary asks an honest question. In verse 35 she asks, *"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"* The angel explains. Gabriel shares that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the child to be born will be holy. After sharing that Elizabeth is pregnant as well, Gabriel concludes his message with this great closer: *"For nothing will be impossible with God"*. I imagine there is a little pause between this verse and verse 38. In amazing humility and sincere faith, Mary says, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"*. Wow, what an example of an "altogether" love.



In contrast to Mary and her example, I think we too often live an "almost love". In that sense, we are more like Zechariah. We hear the still small voice, but we just hear it. We do not necessarily join Mary in saying, *"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word"*. We do not always say "use me as you will, Lord". Our Advent study touches on this idea too.



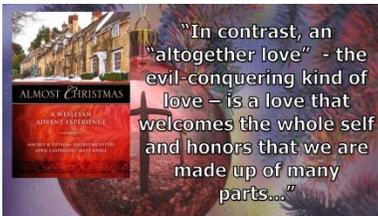
Reading from page 63, author April Casperson has these words to share:



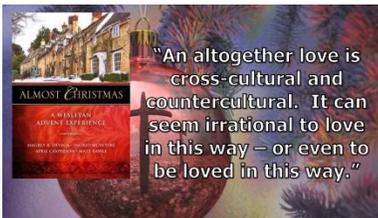
*"Too often, we settle for an "almost love" instead of the real thing. We content ourselves with a pale beam that leaves plenty of shadows rather than a bright illumination that can fill the world.*



*An "almost love" is a love that welcomes only the parts of people that are desirable, or palatable, or easy to handle.*



*In contrast, an "altogether love" – the evil-conquering kind of love – is a love that welcomes the whole self and honors that we are made up of many parts.*

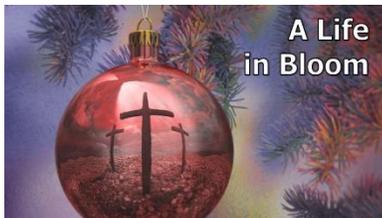


*An altogether love is cross-cultural and countercultural. It can seem irrational to love in this way – or even to be loved in this way".*

To settle for an "almost love" is a 'less than' love. This is dangerous because when we limit ourselves to an "almost love", we do not show our whole selves. We wear masks and we only reveal some of ourselves. We are only willing to be transparent to the degree that feels safe. On the other side of this mirror is the self that we want to personify. Three weeks ago, I spoke of John Wesley's observation of "heathen honesty" that typified many people in his 18<sup>th</sup> century England. They appeared to be good people, to have a godliness about them. They seemed to care for the poor and others in need. But only so far. They would feed the hungry – if they had enough to eat themselves. They would give to the orphan and widow – if they had a good plenty in the bank.

Those practicing heathen honesty would go to church, would pray, would appear to be godly. They were living out an “almost love”. They mostly loved God and sort of loved neighbor.

In contrast to this “almost”, superficial, shallow love, we can choose to live an altogether love. But beware: this kind of a love is scary. This kind of love is messy. This kind of love is irrational. This is dangerous, because it leads us to fully reveal ourselves to others and to be willing to fully know others – sins, warts, blemishes, and all. An altogether love leads us to accept one another as we are, to love on each other no matter what. Scary, messy, irrational – sounds like good words for this kind of a love. This scary, messy, irrational love leads us to the place where we find Mary in our scripture today. It leads us to the place of being all-in for God. It is the kind of love that God has for each of us.



Advent, once again, is very much about the now and not yet. Luke 1 focuses our attention on the birth story.

We exit Luke 1 being pointed toward the virgin birth, toward the manger in Bethlehem. The irrational thought of God taking on flesh and living amongst us lies just ahead. Soon Mary will go to visit Elizabeth and Joseph will wrestle with his doubts and fears. But that is for another Sunday. Today we have Mary and Elizabeth, two women favored by God, lovingly and obediently stepping forward to serve the God they love.

The focus of our Advent study, John Wesley, was another person who loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. He was a devout follower of God who lovingly and boldly stepped forward into the lives of the poor and marginalized. Talk about scary and messy and irrational! What allowed Mary

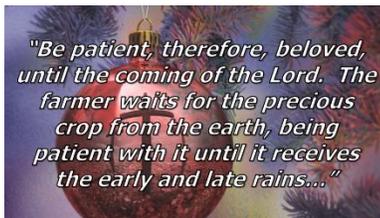
and Elizabeth to step out in faith, what brought tangible hope to those who heard Isaiah's words of hope, what allowed Wesley to enter the factories, mines, fields, and street corners was the same thing: a rock-solid belief in God and his love and his purposes for their lives.

While we do not know very much about the spiritual lives of Mary or Elizabeth or Isaiah, we do know much about Wesley's personal spiritual disciplines. Wesley led a private faith life that revealed a deep trust and connection to God. As Wesley opened himself up to others, small groups of men and women, the conversations and prayers were marked by a deep and sure faithfulness to God and to his brothers and sisters in Christ. This "altogether love", this acceptance of one another warts and all, led to deep and honest conversations about faith. Wesley and his closest friends shared their altogether selves with one another. Doing so, they experienced what it meant to be fully known and fully loved. This led Wesley to have a solid and sure foundation from which he could go forth to care for the needs of the poor and marginalized. His sure and solid foundation strengthened Wesley and allowed God's love to be shed abroad in his life. John Wesley lived out this idea of a life in bloom. Like those mountain wildflowers, Wesley brought peace and hope and love into the world's darkness.

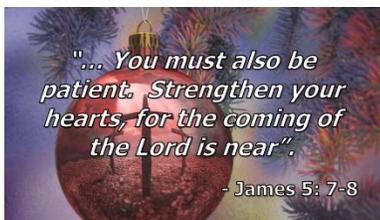
A life in bloom yearns to bring an altogether love to the world in need. In the video that accompanies this week's Advent study, one of the authors says the antithesis of love is feeling or being fragmented or separated. To be fragmented is to be less than whole. To be separated is to be at least partially removed from community. It is what I spoke of earlier. We are fragmented or separated when we show only some of ourselves, either to God or to one another. Wesley believed that love was the chief antidote to fragmentation and separation.

Therefore, he sought to shed abroad love in the world. He did that by engaging the needs of the poor, the widows and orphans, the prisoners.

As we begin to draw to a close, I invite you to turn to James 5. We will be reading verses seven and eight. James is encouraging the believers to be patient, to stay the course. Hear these words from James:

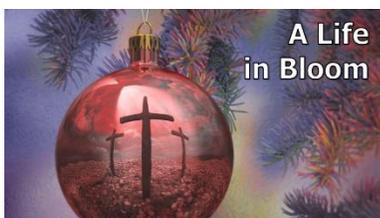


*Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains.*



*You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.*

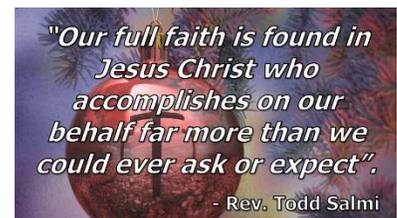
This passage was the focus of Day 10 in our Advent devotional. The question posed for that day was this: "Am I willing to go a step further and be an "altogether" Christian"? It is a good question to consider and an interesting twist on what it can mean to go a "step further". If we are willing to be part of God's work in the world, part of the challenge of serving God is being patient as far as seeing a return. We know that God works in God's ways and in God's time. Advent calls us to a time of preparation for the coming of the Lord and for the coming of God into our world.



Reading from day 10's devotional: *"We often think of patience as passive inaction. James's word of patience is not 'just let go and let God,' but a call to active*

*expectation of God's new thing about to burst forth! James offers a parable of a farmer who patiently waits for both the early and late rains to produce a precious crop. This beautiful image of rain reminds us of God's work of pouring out from the heavens and fulfilling God's promise on earth. Our active patience gives us time to pay attention to how God is at work in the world around us, and to discern what we can do to cooperate with God. Patience reminds us that the center of our faith isn't our own abilities or accomplishments; our full faith is found in Jesus Christ who accomplishes on our behalf more than we could ever ask or expect". (Reverend Todd Salmi, Kindle page location 409 of 1113.)*

What active expectation are you practicing this Advent season? How are you seeking God's "new thing" that seeks to burst forth, blooming into life? In our passage from James the farmer patiently waits. But he does not wait idly. With patience, the farmer strengthens his heart, allowing the Lord to draw near. Living with an active patience invites God to work in our lives. It leads us to consider how God might want to use us and to consider how we can best cooperate with God's work in the world. Patience keeps the focus on Jesus, not on ourselves. We work with the Holy Spirit instead of running off on our own. We remain in community with God and with one another. Then we live into the last line. Let me read it for you again. The words will be on the screen: *"Our full faith is found in Jesus Christ who accomplishes on our behalf more than we could ever ask or expect".* That is the story of Mary and Elizabeth. That is the story of the incarnation. That can be our story as well.



The Advent book's chapter for week three closes with this thought: *"Thank God for Mary saying yes, for Jesus saying yes... so that we can be whole, so that we can be an ambassador and conduit of love for fragmented people everywhere"*.

A conduit of love for fragmented people everywhere. May it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) Grow. Where has God been "blooming" your faith during Advent?
- 2) Pray. Isaiah promises that life will break forth in the wilderness. Where do you need God to bring life into dryness or despair? Bring it to God!
- 3) Serve. God calls us to give our whole selves to his service. How can you more openly and honestly share yourself with God and with others?