

s-A3A-07-The Sign of Love  
Isaiah 7:10-16 *The Lord will give you a sign* (Lection for A4A)  
Luke 1:26-56 *The Annunciation & Magnificat* (Lection for A3A)  
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STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN: THE SIGN OF LOVE

*The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases;  
God's mercies never come to an end.  
They are new every morning.*

*The Lord God gave the peoples of the earth a garden,  
And the people said: "That's very nice, God,  
but that's not enough. We'd like a little knowledge, please."  
The Lord God gave them knowledge,  
And the people said: "Now that we have knowledge,  
we'd like things."*

*The Lord God gave the people things,  
But they always said: "That's not quite enough."  
So the Lord God gave them gifts unequalled:*

*The Sun  
Lightening and Thunder  
Rain and Flowers  
Animals and Birds and Fish  
Trees and Stars and the Moon*

*God gave them the Rainbow  
God parted the Red Sea and gave them Manna  
God gave them Prophets*

*And Children  
And Each Other,*

*But still the people said, "That's not quite enough."*

*God loved the people,  
And out of ultimate merciful goodness  
God gave them the Gift of Gifts—  
A Christmas present never to be forgotten—  
God gave them Love  
In the form of God's Son,  
Even Christ Jesus.*

*There are some that don't open their eyes  
or their ears or their hearts  
And they still say, that's not quite enough.  
They wander through the stores looking for Christmas;  
But others open their whole being to the Lord,  
Bending their knees to praise God,  
Carrying Christmas with them every day.  
For these the whole world is a gift!*

In this poem from her book, *Reaching for Rainbows*, poet Ann Weems expresses what I would call the genuine sentiment of Christmas—that Love makes the world go 'round.

Love makes the world go 'round—and around and around until it comes back to the beginning—to Christmas—one more time. One real gift of Christmas is that it happens every year! Every year, we are given this invitation one more time; we're afforded another chance to "do it right."

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthian church, "Love never ends." That's because all the love there is comes directly from God—in fact, we often say that God is love. It might be more accurate to say that love is God—God working miracles in the human heart.

You know, we're always talking about the "steadfast love of God." What does "steadfast" mean? It means unchanging, through thick or thin. In our variable human way, we tap into that steadfast love and express it through our relationships with others.

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Our lesson today is the story of two women whose love for each other was steadfast. Mary, the young virgin, betrothed but not yet married; and Elizabeth, long-married but without children.

Could there be any two women more different in age, situation, and status? Mary's life was just beginning, really—according to the customs of the time, she would have been at most thirteen years old. Elizabeth, on the other hand, had already lived a full life; she and her husband Zechariah served in the Jerusalem temple.

And yet these two women—with such different lives—were close relatives and loving friends. It was to Elizabeth that Mary flew with the disturbing news of her embarrassing and inexplicable pregnancy. Wise Elizabeth, holy Elizabeth, motherly Elizabeth, who had never borne a child of her own!

Perhaps Mary was like the daughter that Elizabeth never had. Maybe they enjoyed one of those generation-bridging friendships that women often make

with each other. Maybe Mary just went to her kinswoman because she knew that Elizabeth loved her with a steadfast love, and that no matter how mysterious the child growing within her might be, no matter how society might point fingers and assign blame, no matter the danger that might accompany such a miracle—Elizabeth represented safety, loyalty, acceptance, and home.

I can think of another story, a much older story, in which two women were linked by affection and loyalty—the story of Ruth and Naomi. There’s no miraculous birth in that story—just a lot of traveling around and an unlikely but provident romance, but still, Ruth and Naomi compare nicely with Mary and Elizabeth as examples of female friendship and mutual support and love.

Having started this sermon out with a poem, I’d like to point out the exceedingly beautiful language of love that links these two stories.

Remember how, when Naomi tells the widowed Ruth to go back to her own family, Ruth replies,

*“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”*

And later, as the story comes to its satisfying conclusion, the townspeople witness Ruth’s marriage to Naomi’s kinsman Boaz, and they declare:

*“We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachael and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you, by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”*

And when Ruth and Boaz do produce a son, again the townswomen prophesy before Naomi, saying:

*Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him...A son has been born to Naomi.”*

And they named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David—and thus the distant ancestor of Jesus himself!

Yes, Love makes the world go ‘round—and around and around—and it all seems linked together in a great circle. The story of salvation is from the beginning, and will continue—not to the end, but until God brings us around to the beginning once again.

What are the signs of God’s love? Well, the Christmas story is chock-full of them, starting with an angel appearing to Zechariah to predict the birth of John

the Baptist. When the old man questions the very possibility, the angel explains that the sign of this event would be Zechariah's inability to talk until the moment when the prophecy would be fulfilled.

The second sign would have to be Elizabeth's conception of a child, when she was beyond the age when such things ought to be possible. Barrenness was supposed to be a curse, and these biblical babies born to moms who had given up trying were always viewed as miracles. Elizabeth was ecstatic, Zechariah was silent, and I bet both of them were flabbergasted at the turn of events!

Then an even more miraculous conception came about—when the angel Gabriel visited Mary with his strange and frightening message. I read somewhere a suggestion that Mary had probably read the popular and ancient fable of Tobit, in which an evil angel visits a bride over and over, killing her successive bridegrooms. Could Mary, youngster that she was, have this awful story in the back of her mind when Gabriel appeared? She may have been afraid that this angel was going to interfere in some way with her marriage to Joseph!

Well, Gabriel *did* interfere, but not by murdering the bridegroom. The interference was with the traditional order of things. As the kids on my block used to chant, "First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in a baby carriage!" Mary was being told that God was setting her up—things weren't going to go quite so smoothly; this wasn't going to be the dream wedding of the century.

You know, a lot of modern people have trouble with the annunciation. The idea that God would get a teenager pregnant is weird and disturbing, in today's literal-minded interpretations of the event. We're creeped out—not just because we don't think of God as a physical being, but also because Mary's pregnancy put her into genuine and terrible danger. And that "handmaid of the Lord" stuff has been used too much to cram obedience and submissiveness down the throats of young women through the centuries. But God is still speaking about miracles, too. Perhaps there are spiritual and mystical ways to understand Gabriel's message and the subsequent reality of Mary's pregnancy.

The New Interpreter's Study Bible has an interesting footnote about that. What it says is: Gabriel's announcement draws heavily on the language of 2 Samuel 7:11-16, presenting Jesus as the actualization of Nathan's promise to David of an everlasting dynasty. How Mary conceives is not discussed. There is no hint that God impregnated her, as in Greco-Roman myths where Zeus comes down and takes a human lover. Luke's language emphasizes divine agency without taking up issues of gynecology. The result is a characterization of Jesus as the Son of God that moves beyond the more functional categories found in Israel's scriptures. The God of Israel is not made in human image, and to be God's Son does not require divine genetic engineering. And yet, Luke understands that

the link between God and Jesus is beyond anything chronicled before. Luke has no knowledge about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, since that is something that will be worked out in subsequent centuries, but his narrative does give witness to the view that Jesus shares in God's identity.

Round and round goes the steadfast love of God. Sign after sign.  
Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, John... and at long last, Jesus.

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The story concludes with Mary's song of joyful triumph. How that song echoes so many songs of biblical women down through the ages! Miriam, Hannah, Jael, Judith, Deborah, Naomi—we hear them all echoed in her words.

You see, somewhere in the tiny moment between Mary's innocent greeting upon arrival and the joyful leaping of Elizabeth's unborn son, the Holy Spirit has filled the room with love. And in this suspended, mystical moment, Mary and Elizabeth both recognize that the child in Mary's womb is the Messiah.

This is more than a miracle—it is *the* miracle, the one for which all the world has been waiting since time began!

And so, it isn't so strange to keep Christmas in our hearts all year long. It isn't unrealistic to view the whole world as a gift. That just shows we understand the wider dimensions of the nativity story, and how it illustrates the steadfast nature of God, never changing, always abundant, so full of promise, so full of love.

Amen.

#### PASTORAL PRAYER:

Holy and loving God, we celebrate your love every day of our lives by loving one another and this beautiful world in which we live. We demonstrate our understanding by living out your commands and your intentions in loving and caring ways. And we seek to reach the perfect center of that love through Christ our Lord, your Son, Mary's child, the Savior who was promised and who has come. Amen.