

Singing our Faith: Love
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Luke 1:39-56 CEB

The first genre of music most of us heard in this world were probably songs about love and sang out of love: lullabies. Not all lullabies are about the cheery parts of love, go look up the full lyrics to "You Are My Sunshine" - it'll ruin your day. But we began our lifelong relationship with music being sang to by perhaps some adult: maybe a parent, a grandparent, a guardian of some sort; and we were sung to out of the unearned love for new life.

Love really drives most music. Just turn on the radio and you'll make your way through all stages of love, the good and the bad. There was a "Top 100 Love Songs" list created a few years back based off of radio airtime, sales, and surveys. I'll just name a few:

96. Always on my Mind
89. I Can't Make You Love Me
84. If I Fell
77. Unforgettable
61. Tears in Heaven
55. I Don't Wanna Miss a Thing
48. My Heart Will Go On
47. I Wanna Know What Love is
28. Your Song
20. I Will Always Love You
15. Faithfully
13. Wicked Game

12. I Got You Babe

And of course, the King of all loving lullabies, Elvis Presley's, "Love Me Tender". Love that song!

And now that you all probably have one of those songs I just named stuck in your head (you're welcome) - we can talk about how love in all its many forms: familial, between friends, romantic, love of self, the deep abiding love I have for my cats, is just such an indescribably strong feeling. It gives moms super strength to save their child in danger, it inspires people to spend their entire savings and move far away to be with someone, it creates space to forgive when we have been wronged.

So, it's no surprise that Christmas, this time when we celebrate love and even light a candle for love, is so tightly wound with music. We Methodists as "The Singing Church" adore singing to begin with but put a little holiday magic in our step and we've got a new hymn book.

The main hymn we're focusing on today is a short, simple hymn: "Love Came Down at Christmas". It's only three short verses, the whole song only takes up half a page in our hymnal, but in the quick song - the word "love" is used 12 times - once as "lovely" but we'll count it.

The song is written by 18th century religious poet, Christina Rossetti of London who, interestingly enough given today's scripture reading, used to pose as the Madonna, as the Mother Mary for the artwork of her brothers - fun fact. Similarly to last week's hymn focus on "Come Thou Long Expected Jesus", this song also began its life as a poem. After a few publications, people began putting it to different tunes and it

eventually made its way into hymnbooks. The most familiar of the tunes it's put to is a traditional Irish melody called "Garton" which, quite fittingly, has a lullaby feel to it. If your brain isn't coming up with the tune, don't fret, we'll be singing it in just a few minutes!

Richard Watson, a British hymnologist (which is a thing), describes this song by saying: "The sublime simplicity of this hymn is the mark of a very great writer."

Dr. Hawn, professor of sacred music at Perkins School of Theology, SMU describes this song as: "...the perfect antidote for those who find themselves recovering from the stress of the Christmas season induced by materialism, extensive shopping, travel and multiple gatherings of family and friends—in short, everything except for a moment to reflect on the gift of 'Love incarnate, Love divine.'"

The songs repetitive focus on love being the reason for and outcome of the Christmas season actually mirrors the scripture text it was based off of, which is 1 John 4:7-11 entitled, "Love and God". It reads:

"Dear friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God. The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love. This is how the love of God is revealed to us: God has sent his only Son into the world so that we can live through him. This is love: it is not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as the sacrifice that deals with our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other."

And that is what we're going to focus on today: Christmas as a love song, a lullaby as it were, to us from God.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, we're looking at one of my favorite Christmas texts that I preached about last year: it's the text where a pregnant Mary visits a pregnant Elizabeth, and they are so filled with love for God, for themselves, for their bodies, for their unborn children; that Mary's contagious love manifests itself into a song of rebellion against the evil powers that threaten to overcome the world:

"With all my heart I glorify the Lord!
In the depths of who I am I rejoice in God my savior.
He has looked with favor on the low status of his servant.
Look! From now on, everyone will consider me highly favored
because the mighty one has done great things for me.
Holy is his name.
He shows mercy to everyone,
 from one generation to the next,
 who honors him as God.
He has shown strength with his arm.
He has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud
inclinations.
He has pulled the powerful down from their thrones
 and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty-handed.
He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
 remembering his mercy,
just as he promised to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever."

Mary and Elizabeth, better than anyone else, understood what's coming. Understood that the brokenness that Elizabeth had experienced, the poverty that Mary lived in, were about to be met with God's wild act of love. They understood, better than anyone else, that with the birth of their son's, particularly Mary's, God, who had been ever-present with God's people since

the beginning of creation, loves all of us just as a parent loves their child, just as Mary and Elizabeth loved their unborn children, and that God was willing to suffer so that we could know and share such a love.

When I had visited the ecumenical Taizé Monastery in the South of France, I was struck by this one stained glass window that is also an icon. As you can see in the image, we have both Mary and Elizabeth reaching for one another in their joy and love for each other and what they get to experience together, but also the faintest hints of Jesus and John in the womb also up and about and reaching for one another. It's such an amazing, and what I feel, accurate interpretation of the text. Look at this image as a re-read the beginning of today's text:

"Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. With a loud voice she blurted out, 'God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her.'"

On Christmas, the purest, most undeserved love from a parent to a child came down to Earth simply out of love. It makes me think of my favorite line from another beloved Christmas Carol, "Oh Holy Night". Every time I hear the line, I can feel it in my neck: "Till he appear'd and the soul felt its worth." The love that becomes evident with the events of Christmas makes our very souls feel their full worth, their full love from our Creator, Parent God.

The focus on love becoming incarnate in the hymn "Love Came Down at Christmas" is a significant lens adjustment from the other well-known Christmas hymn that Christina Rossetti wrote the words for, "In the Bleak Midwinter".

"In the Bleak Midwinter" is not a particularly cheery Christmas Carol as it paints a picture of the poor, cold, poverty-stricken, broken reality that the world that Christ was born into really is. Yet, it still holds this idea of Christmas, Christ's birth being rooted in love from God and how our love only exists because God loved us first. It ends with the line, "...yet what I can I give him: give my heart."

This Christmas, amongst all the hubbub of the holidays, my challenge to you, my challenge to myself really, is to allow yourself to actually be that loved. Say yes to, accept a love so great, that the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of all the universe was so desperate for your soul to feel it's worth, that God was willing to join us on earth as a small, fragile, human. You are that loved, and there's just really nothing you can do to change that. That love was proven to us, when it came down at the first Christmas.