

A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
*Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on December 22, 2019 (Advent 4, Year A)*

My favorite Christmas movie is *Love Actually*. If you're not familiar, it's one of these movies that features every star you've ever heard of in Hollywood and several interconnected plot lines focused on the same theme—in this case, love at Christmas. Now, most of the time, my taste in the arts is completely indefensible. And on one level, my love of this movie is just about Hugh Grant and very quotable British humor. But I've been thinking that maybe there's another reason. At this time of year, we are inundated by Hallmark Christmas movies and jewelry and car commercials and peddling a sickly sweet brand of love, one that, at the core, is completely facile. Underneath *Love Actually's* syrupy slogan that "love actually is all around" are stories that feel much more true than the usual seasonal fare, stories about how love is difficult, painful, and costly.

One of the plotlines focuses on a grieving stepfather, Daniel, played by Liam Neeson, and his stepson Sam. Daniel's wife, Sam's mom, has recently died. Sam has been shutting himself up in his room, and Daniel is worried. They sit together on a bench, looking out on the Thames, and Daniel asks what's going on? Is it grief over mom, or is it something else? Sam confesses that, actually, he is in love. Daniel laughs. "I'm a little relieved," he says. "I thought it would be something worse!" But eleven-year-old Sam is incredulous. "Worse than the total agony of being in love?" "No, you're right," Daniel says reflectively. "Total agony."

This Sunday, we light the fourth candle on the Advent wreath-- the candle that, according to tradition, represents love. In particular, God's love for us. And that love *is* agony. Ruth Burrows, a Carmelite nun, likens God to a blissfully happy couple, who decide, out of pure generosity and a desire share their happiness, to adopt children. She writes, "From then on their life undergoes a profound change. Now they are vulnerable; their happiness is wrapped up in the welfare of the children; things can never be the same again."<sup>1</sup>

At the moment of creation, *God* fundamentally changes. *God* becomes vulnerable. *God's* happiness becomes wrapped up in the welfare of creation. God, as Burrows writes, "is no longer pure God, but God with humanity in [God's] heart." And since the very beginning, creation, humanity, has been a source of joy and delight but also profound sorrow and pain. Every moment of every day, as God beholds our alienation from God and each other, and the suffering that stems from that alienation, God is in agony.

God's response to that agony is what makes God God. Because God's power lies not so much in God's *might*, but in God's *love*, which is so pure and perfect and strong that there is no bitterness, no desire for vengeance, no impulse to turn away. In God's heartbreak, God wants only to come close to us. That is why God becomes human. God empties Godself, loses Godself, in order to reach us.

But God does not, maybe even cannot, do this alone. This year, our Advent readings are taken from the Gospel of Matthew, which focuses exclusively on Joseph and his perspective. There is no annunciation, no angel Gabriel, no visit between Mary and Elizabeth, no Magnificat. Instead, it opens with a crisis. Mary and Joseph are engaged. This

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure : Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2011), 133.

is more than just a promise. The ketubah, the marriage contract, has already been signed. They are legally bound to one another, it just hasn't been consummated, which is why Mary is still living in her parents' home. But then, Mary is "found to be with child." Maybe she's told her family or friends, or maybe people have noticed that she is showing and they are starting to talk. Joseph knows that he is not—could not be—the father. The only possible explanation is that the child has been fathered by someone else. It is shattering. Joseph, who we are told is a good man, a righteous man, agonizes about what to do. Should he expose Mary, preserving his innocence and his reputation but leaving Mary and her child to fend for themselves? Or should he move ahead with the marriage, knowing that it will mean embracing a wife who has been unfaithful? That it will mean accepting someone else's child as his firstborn, his heir, and the bearer of his family name? And if he does, will he be able to trust Mary? Will he be able to love this child?

We do not know how long Joseph agonizes, or if he ever asks Mary for her side of the story, but we do know that he finally decides—he will dismiss her, which really means, divorce her, quietly, an attempt to preserve both their reputations.

Just when Joseph makes up his mind, God shows up. God sends an angel to deliver a message, a couple of things God wants Joseph to know before he takes any action. Don't be afraid of this, the angel says. Don't let fear be the thing that drives your decision. Mary's child is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and if you choose this, you will name him Jesus, meaning, God saves, because he will save his people from their sins.

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We know so little about Joseph. After Jesus' childhood, he disappears from the Gospels. Tradition tells us that he died before Jesus' ministry began. But we do know this. Joseph is faced with a choice. He is free to accept or refuse.<sup>2</sup> For him, the memory of that dream, that reassurance from God is enough to tip the scales. In the midst of the messiness and unknowability and the risk, Joseph chooses to love Mary and her child, who becomes his own. He chooses to make space in his heart and home to provide the care and protection that Mary and her baby need.

And he continues to choose it, again and again: as he tends to Mary on the long, hard journey to Bethlehem; as he makes an offering in *thanksgiving* for this scandalous child's birth; as he protects his family from the threat by Herod, leading them on a nighttime flight into the strange new land; as he patiently teaches his son his trade and he raises him in the faith.

From that moment of that first choice, that moment of new creation, Joseph's life undergoes a profound change. Things can never be the same again. They can never be the same again because now he is vulnerable; his happiness is wrapped up in the welfare of this child, who is destined to suffer. And they can never be the same again because his choice, along with Mary's choice, makes the incarnation possible. He helps to birth God into the world, so that God can come close to us.

The choice, the opportunity, before Joseph, is also our own as we prepare ourselves once more for Christmas. Will we choose to love like God, like Mary, like Joseph? Will we choose the kind of love that makes us vulnerable, that changes us? How will we help to birth God, so that God can come close to our beautiful, broken, bleeding world?

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<sup>2</sup> This language is borrowed from Denise Levertov's poem "Annunciation," where it is used in reference to Mary.