

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Fourth Sunday of Advent – December 20, 2015 – Love**  
**Pilgrimage to the Manger**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Luke 1:46b-55**

**REFLECTION**

**“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that.  
Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”**

— Martin Luther King Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*

**Amahl Unplugged**

I saw “Amahl and the Night Visitors” as a child – I believe it was at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium. I was enthralled. It was my first opera and I was amazed how an entire story could be told in music. Amahl is a poor shepherd boy – who walks with a crutch – and has a penchant for making up fabulous stories – so his mother doesn’t believe him when he says there is a giant star in the sky or there are three fabulous kings knocking at the door. But it all turns out to be true – as the kings are stopping by on their way to see the Christ Child.

In my memory the mother tries to convince the kings that her son is the Christ Child. But I’m probably confusing this with Monty Python’s “Life of Brian.” The actual plot has the mother stealing some of the gold intended for Jesus – so that she can support her son. She is caught – Amahl defends her – she gives the money back – and there is a dénouement I won’t spoil for you. It was high drama – engaging my imagination in deep ways.

And one of the lingering impressions I have lived with over the years is the idea that some parents will do anything for their children. Some people will go outside their “normal” range of behavior on behalf of those they love. One might call it “self-sacrificial love” – or “temporary insanity.” But there are real-life examples – and whenever I hear of one – Amahl comes to mind.

Facebook, one of my juiciest communities – and a village that supports and inspires gratitude every day – brought me a post this week from a friend who was down with the flu. She could hardly function and was being cared for diligently by her wife – who

had just had surgery the week before. My friend was marveling at their circumstances and her wife's exertions – convinced that there must be a word for this that escaped her. And you can guess that the responses – again and again – revealed that the word was LOVE.

My husband, John, and I were having a rare private conversation yesterday – about different kinds of love. He and I met in a book discussion group at Occidental College focused on The Four Loves by C.S. Lewis – so the topic wasn't new. But after 15 years together, 13 of those married, 9 of those with a son – a review of the kinds of love we were practicing was in order. Let me give you a taste of C.S. Lewis' approach before I go on:

Taking his start from St. John's words "God is Love", Lewis initially thought to contrast "Need-love" (such as the love of a child for its mother) and "Gift-love" (epitomized by God's love for humanity), to the disparagement of the former. However, he swiftly happened on the insight that the natures of even these basic categorizations of love are more complicated than they at first seemed: a child's need for parental comfort is a necessity, not a selfish indulgence, while conversely parental Gift-love in excessive form can be a perversion of its own.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Four\\_Loves](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Four_Loves)

Lewis explored the light and dark sides of Empathy, Friendship, Erotic Love, and Agape - aka Service aka Unconditional Love – in his usual Christian professorial way – more easily expressed in his fiction. But as John and I talked yesterday we identified all of these forms of love in our own relationship – some of them more prevalent than others. And John, a Unitarian Buddhist, concluded that Compassion captured the universal religious ideal of love (something for me to remember when self-restraint is the only thing standing between me and my son).

Compassion for self and others is at the root of the commandment Jesus spoke and is echoed in all world religions: Love G-d and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

– Matthew 22:39

And G-d's Compassion for us is what Mary describes in her *Magnificat* – Compassion experienced in the form of Social Justice:

51b ...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

- Luke 1 (NRSV)

Against all logic, Compassion is a quality I look for in political candidates – people who have great influence over our social contract. I believe I found this quality in our current president. On Friday I was discussing politics with my 9-year-old and expressed my distaste for the Anti-Muslim things that candidate Donald Trump was saying. Peter asked, “Why does he think those things?”

I responded, “He’s very self-absorbed. Some people are just like that – not everybody – but some people.”

And Peter brought me to my knees with these words, “Maybe he doesn’t have love in his life.”

Nature or nurture – we all have reasons for why we come to believe the things we believe. And if we are surrounded by loving, compassionate people – we are more likely to express those values. If we are surrounded by self-absorbed, neglectful or even cruel people – our values will be twisted. Peter reminded me to have compassion for Donald Trump, not a mean feat, I assure you.

Bottom line: being a compassionate person means not just SAYING we love someone or a group of people – but DOING something about it. Compassion is behind our interest as a church in sponsoring Syrian refugees, delivering food to people living on the street, promoting unpopular ideas on social media and in conversations in the grocery store. Compassion is underneath our willingness to go outside our comfort zone, behave in ways that are not normal for us – take risks and even break some unjust laws.

Compassion is the reason we take care of loved ones or strangers who are suffering – even if we are suffering at the same time. You’ve heard the platitude “Love is a Verb” – which is actually true. We DO love – we DO justice – we ACT on the leadings of our hearts.

We call this church a BELOVED COMMUNITY for so many reasons. Today we celebrate G-d’s LOVE being born again in our midst.

And we take that LOVE – in all its forms – out into the world – making it real in every way we can think of – inspired by the “true meaning of Christmas” – which is alive and well – right here – this morning.

## **Luke 1:46b-55**

46b "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; 53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

## **FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT \* LOVE**

### **COLOSSIANS 3:12-14**

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,  
clothe yourselves with  
compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.  
Bear with one another and,  
if anyone has a complaint against another,  
forgive each other;  
just as God has forgiven you,  
so you also must forgive.  
Above all, clothe yourselves with love,  
which binds everything together  
in perfect harmony.

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LOVE awaits us in the manger. Let LOVE light our way.

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We light the candle of Love as we travel through this season of Advent.

**(Light three purple candles and the pink one.)**

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Love is the voice under all silences, the hope which has no opposite in fear; the strength so strong mere force is feebleness: the truth more first than sun, more last than star... E.E. Cummings

love is a place  
& through this place of  
love move  
(with brightness of peace)  
all places

yes is a world  
& in this world of  
yes live  
(skilfully curled)  
all worlds

E. E. Cummings (American poet 1894- 1962)

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Here is a poem that suddenly comes to mind. These words are lyrics to a song by Franz Schubert, from his song cycle "Die Schone Mullerin" (umlauts over the "o" and the "u") "The Fair Maid and the Mill." The text of this poem, "The Miller and the Stream," is by Wilhelm Muller (another umlaut over the "u"), translated by William Mann, and copyrighted by him in 1985.

"And when love conquers pain,  
a new star twinkles in the sky,  
then three roses,  
half red and half white, spring  
on a sprig of thorn and never wither.  
And the angels cut off their wings  
and go down to earth every morning."

<https://ameliamandala.wordpress.com/>

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amahl\\_and\\_the\\_Night\\_Visitors](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amahl_and_the_Night_Visitors)

Synopsis

Place: Near Bethlehem.

Time: The first century, just after the birth of Christ

Amahl, a disabled boy who can walk only with a crutch, has a problem with telling tall tales. He is sitting outside playing his shepherd's pipe when his mother calls for him (Amahl! Amahl!). After much persuasion, he enters the house but his mother does not believe him when he tells her there is an amazing star "as big as a window" outside over their roof (O Mother You Should Go Outside; Stop Bothering Me!).

Later that night, Amahl's mother weeps, praying that Amahl not become a beggar (Don't Cry Mother Dear). After bedtime (From Far Away We Come), there is a knock at the door and the mother tells Amahl to go see who it is (Amahl ... Yes Mother!). He is amazed when he sees three splendidly dressed kings (the Magi), one of whom is black. At first the mother does not believe Amahl, but when she goes to the door to see for herself, she is stunned. The Three Kings tell the mother and Amahl they are on a long journey to give gifts to a wondrous Child and they would like to rest at their house, to which the mother agrees (Good Evening!; Come In!), saying that all she can offer is "a cold fireplace and a bed of straw". The mother goes to fetch firewood, and Amahl seizes the opportunity to speak with the kings. King Balthazar answers Amahl's questions about his life as a king and asks what Amahl does. Amahl responds that he was once a shepherd, but his mother had to

sell his sheep. Now, he and his mother will have to go begging. Amahl then talks with King Kaspar, who is childlike, eccentric, and a bit deaf. Kaspar shows Amahl his box of magic stones, beads, and licorice, and offers Amahl some of the candy (Are You A Real King?; This is My Box). The mother returns (Amahl, I Told You Not To Be A Nuisance!). Amahl is told to go fetch the neighbors (All These Beautiful Things; Have You Seen a Child?) so the kings may be fed and entertained properly (Shepherds! Shepherds!; Emily! Emily; Olives and Quinces; Dance of the Shepherds).

After the neighbors have left and the kings are resting, the mother attempts to steal for her son some of the kings' gold that was meant for the Christ child (All That Gold). She is thwarted by the kings' page. ("Thief! Thief!") When Amahl wakes to find the page grabbing his mother, he attacks him. ("Don't You Dare!") Seeing Amahl's weak defense of his mother and understanding the motives for the attempted theft, King Melchior says she may keep the gold as the Holy Child will not need earthly power or wealth to build his kingdom. ("Oh, Woman, You Can Keep That Gold") The mother says she has waited all her life for such a king and asks the kings to take back the gold. She wishes to send a gift but has nothing to send. Amahl, too, has nothing to give the Child except his crutch. ("Oh, No, Wait") When he offers it to the kings, his leg is miraculously healed. ("I Walk, Mother") With permission from his mother, he leaves with the kings to see the Child and give his crutch in thanks for being healed.

Among other things, the story is that of a boy growing up. The relationship between Amahl and his mother is informed by the 1950s American family.