

Sunday, December 20, 2020 ADVENT 4

Luke 1:57-69 Luke 2:1-7

Christmas is a Time to Love

In the movie “Home Alone”, a young boy Kevin McAllister was unintentionally left behind by his family as they prepared for a family Christmas vacation. While alone, we have seen Kevin experience freedom as he did what he wanted and ate what he could. We also saw the antics he went through to protect his home from robbers. We then saw him gain understanding of what Christmas means as he witnesses the reconciliation of his neighbour’s family. As the movie continues Kevin wonders what will happen with Christmas celebrations as he grows tired of being alone and how he treated his family. He realizes again that he truly misses his family. Kevin is needing to be loved and to give this to others but he does not know where they are or when they will be home.

Our region of Windsor-Essex is now in code grey-lockdown. The second wave of covid19 has increased the caseload significantly as numbers are rising. But there is also good news—the two pharmaceutical companies Pfizer and Moderna are now shipping vaccines across the country and those at high risk are now receiving it! This is good yet we also know that there are many people who will not be vaccinated for a while yet. We cannot stop wearing masks or social distancing. Our heads are telling us what is the right thing to do, but this season of Christmas calls us to reach out to show and share our love with others. So how do we find the space where these two dynamics can meet? We want to stay home and safe and limit our social bubbles making sure we are healthy but still reach out as we need to ensure our family members are well. This hardly seems like Christmas but it is a necessary way of observing Christ’s birth because we do love our families and friends.

Our first reading from Luke 1 completes the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth’s anticipation of the birth of their son John. Zechariah has named the child as the angel had told him and he is then able to speak after many months of holding within himself the wonder, joy and love he has received from God. Zechariah was filled with God’s Spirit and prophesied about his newborn son, John because he believed that this infant would be the one to prepare the people for the coming messiah. Zechariah believed that John was the one who would tell the people about the One who would save them from enemies. Zechariah also spoke about how God fulfilled his promise with the coming saviour. He describes the task of his son John, who would be the prophet of the Most High and his purpose would be to go before the Lord to

prepare his ways. John would teach the people about salvation and about what being forgiven would mean. John would also be the one who would point to the Light in the darkness and this light is Jesus. Zechariah believed that his son John, had a special task ahead of him. He was to prepare the people for the coming Saviour. As a priest and teacher, Zechariah knew how the Spirit of God had moved and he also knew of the prophesies of generations before. Through these, Zechariah had faith in what was to come. So Zechariah and Elizabeth took on the task of raising their son with God's Spirit leading them. They knew that the Spirit would guide him even after he grew up and left to live in the wilderness and began to preach the gospel of salvation made possible through the one who would follow.

We are just a few days away from celebrating the big day- Christmas. Often at this time, we might ask others about whether they had their shopping or gift giving ready. But with the lockdown—most people in this area are shopping online- often for the first time, in order to have something to present under the trees of those we love. With this action, have we lost the meaning of what we are doing this for? Kevin knew that there were no presents to open and what fun would it have been had he been alone to do this. So what does he do? He just sits around until he hears a key in the lock. His mother has returned ahead of the rest of the family. They stare at each other- a little bit angry at first and this gives way to smiles and of course a warm embrace. Kevin then asks a lot of questions just like his mother and the feeling of family exudes and we are caught in it as well. This feeling is love- familial love where one cares about another. But how do you describe it? Families have many configurations today and yet what really binds them is love- unconditional, unfailing, unending love.

Paul writes of the qualities of love in his first letter to the Corinthians by describing its qualities as it exists in relationships. Love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things—love never ends. This passage, often shared during weddings, describes love in action, but how do we express love especially this Christmas?

Just reflect for a moment on Mary and Joseph. They are in Bethlehem because of a government decree that they had to go to where the family line had been established. As the betrothed wife of Joseph, this meant a trip for this couple from Nazareth to Bethlehem about 90 miles. It would have taken them from 4-7 days depending upon how Mary felt as she was pregnant and would probably need rest and exercise along the way. The donkey upon which she rode would also need to stop, rest, eat and drink for it too needed to be cared for during the

trip. Eventually they arrive in Bethlehem and Joseph did not know what to do or where to go. All the inns were full due to the government registration and Mary had told Joseph that something was not right because she was in pain. They needed a place to rest for it would not be long before Mary would soon deliver the baby. Joseph and Mary are not at home surrounded by loved ones as they await the baby. They are in a strange town, know no one and the only place available to them is a stable behind an inn. It is the keeper who lets them rest in a stable where the transportation animals of other guests are being fed, water and kept safe and warm. They are homeless, desperate for a place to stay and then Mary starts having contractions. As a young woman we do not know if she has any idea what is happening to her. She might have been with other women in the family as they gave birth but we do not know. But Mary chews on ice chips, paces the floor of the stable and eventually this family of 2 becomes a family of three. This baby is born and immediately the baby becomes a part of a family filled with love. Jesus is born and wrapped up in cloth to keep him warm and ready to eat.

Just take a moment to reflect on all those images of the nativity scene we hold so dear to us. It is a stable, filled with animals and clean hay. IT is warm and it is in this place that Mary gives birth. We are not told if only Joseph was with her but probably not; other women in the inn might have helped her give birth. Now Jesus is born into a family of love. Yet we also know that this might not have occurred until Mary agreed with the angel, but she agreed with God and she knew that the baby she carried and delivered would save the people. She was not sure about the future generations but she knew the Jesus was of God's Spirit and so he needed to be raised to be fully aware of what is occurring.

In these next days you will have an opportunity to connect with your family members via telephone, zoom or face time. However you do plan to do this, remember why and what you are doing. As Canadians we often start conversations about the weather the cold the snow or lack of it. But this is not only what should be shared. We need to share about your life and then listen to what others are doing. You are to listen and share love simply and honestly knowing that your family members care and love you too! Show your love, express emotions- tell them how you feel.

This is what happened to Kevin when the rest of his family came in to the house. They were not all hugging him, but affection and love were real as they had each worried about this young boy who didn't burn down the house but had protected it and lived as best he could. We also know that his brother did miss him until and at least until the time when his brother saw the mess that Kevin had made in his room. We also do not know where the pet tarantula ended up!

But this family is reunited for Christmas and there is love. It won't be a perfect day by any means.

Our celebration of Christmas will not be perfect either—there is no such thing. But what is foundational is the love, joy, peace and hope that is born in the Infant Jesus. With Jesus' birth, we believe by faith that the baby who is born, becomes the Risen Christ and our Saviour. This baby is God's promised Gift of Christmas and this gift comes to us because God loved us so much that we may put our faith in Jesus to receive the gift, hope and promise of eternal life. We just need to believe, have faith and know that one day we will all be together again.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, let us remember how much God truly loves us and let us tell this story of love to all whom we are called to love. Let us be filled anew with God's love given to us in the baby in the manger and the Christ of the cross. God fulfills his promises and so now it is time to celebrate and receive this love.

Let us pray:

Holy God, we thank you for fulfilling the promises of old as you give to us Jesus to be our Saviour and Lord. We praise you for this story which has been shared for over 2000 years yet still helps us to overcome fears, and invites us to have faith and hope for tomorrow no matter the circumstances of today. We love you God, because you first loved us and created us to be your faithful children. Show us your way O God to share your promises given to us in Jesus our Saviour as we live loving one another. We ask this in faith and with love. Amen.