



Roanoke, Virginia

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## **“Love”**

Once Upon an Advent Sermon Series Part IV

*Luke 1:26-38, I John 4:7-12*

**Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link**

Luke 1:26-38. <sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

I John 4:7-12. <sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God loved us so much,



we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Tradition tells us that Mary was about fourteen years old when she gave birth to Jesus. Fourteen. The Gospels tell us remarkably little about her, and perhaps that's why, for two thousand years, the church has tried to fill in the gaps. Even now, we can't quite agree on who Mary is. Some pray to her. Some avoid her. Some call her Theotokos, "God-bearer." Others hold her up as an ideal: ever sinless, ever virgin, ever mother. And every Advent, our hymns circle around her with wonder, asking the same question: did she have any idea what lay ahead?

The story of the Annunciation itself may sound familiar this time of year. We hear it in Christmas pageants, in carols, and on Christmas Eve. "In the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth—The virgin's name was Mary."

From that astonishing opening, the story moves at a breathtaking pace. Gabriel appears. He greets Mary as God's favored one. He announces an impossible pregnancy and an even more impossible future. Mary asks a question. Gabriel responds. Mary consents. And then, just as suddenly as he arrived, the angel is gone.

In an instant, Mary's life is changed forever.

What's unsettling about this story is not only what it tells us, but how quickly it tells it. Luke gives us just a few details: Mary is "much perplexed." She ponders. She asks a practical, honest question, "How can this be?" a question that tells us she understands how strange, how dangerous this seems. And then, Luke tells us, she says "yes."

Beyond those few brushstrokes, the Gospel is silent. So much is left unsaid. And it's in those silences, in what the text doesn't tell us, that the weight, the courage, and the cost of Mary's "yes" begins to come into focus.

Because love, real love, rarely arrives with full explanations. Love does not rush. Love does not force. Love enters quietly, waits patiently, and asks for room.

A few years ago, Julie Mugford shared Susan Wojciechowki's beautiful book *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* with our daughter Eleanor and me. It is a story about love entering a life slowly, almost imperceptibly, and changing everything.



Jonathan Toomey is a gifted woodcarver—and a deeply unhappy man. The village children call him Mr. Gloomy. He grumbles about the bells, the birds, and the noise of children playing too loudly.

Jonathan Toomey was a woodcarver—a really good one. He spent his days sitting at a workbench, carving beautiful shapes from blocks of wood. After supper, he spent his nights sitting in a straight-backed chair near the fireplace, smoking his pipe and staring into the flames.

Jonathan Toomey wasn't an old man, but if you saw him, you might think he was.

The people in the village didn't know it, but there was a reason for his gloom. Years earlier, when Jonathan Toomey was full of life and full of love, his wife and baby had become very sick. And because those were the days before hospitals and medicines and skilled doctors, his wife and baby died.

So, Jonathan Toomey packed his belongings into a wagon and travelled until his tears stopped. He settled into a tiny house at the edge of a village.

One day in early December, there was a knock at Jonathan's door. Mumbling and grumbling, he went to answer it. There stood a woman and a young boy.

It was the widow McDowell and her seven-year-old son Thomas. She was new to the village and needed something carved. She told Jonathan about a very special set of Christmas figures her grandfather had carved for her when she was a girl.

They were lost in the move, she explained. She had hoped that by some miracle she would find them again, but it hadn't happened.

Jonathan Toomey didn't believe in miracles, and said as much, gruffly.

Mrs. McDowell described the figures, and Thomas chimed in.

There were two sheep with curly wool. And a cow, an angel, Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, and the wise men.

Jonathan Toomey said yes, he'd take the job.

“Will they be ready by Christmas?” the widow asked.

“They will be ready when they are ready,” the woodcarver replied.



The following week, there was a knock on his door. Grumbling all the way, he went to answer it. It was the widow McDowell and Thomas.

The woman explained that Thomas had been begging to come watch Mr. Toomey work. “He says he wants to be a woodcarver when he grows up,” the woman said, “and he would like to watch you since you are the best in the valley.”

Thomas pleaded and promised to be quiet. With a grumble, Mr. Toomey obliged.

The widow McDowell handed Mr. Toomey a warm loaf of corn bread as a token of thanks. Then she took out her knitting and sat down in a rocking chair at the far corner of the cottage.

“Not there!” bellowed the woodcarver. “No one sits in that chair.” So, she moved to the straight-backed chair by the fire.

Thomas tried very hard to sit still. After a very long time, Thomas cleared his throat and whispered, “Mr. Toomey, may I ask a question?”

The woodcarver grunted, and Thomas decided it meant “yes,” so he went on. “Is that my sheep you’re carving?”

The woodcarver nodded and grunted again.

After another very long time, Thomas whispered, “Mr. Toomey, excuse me, but you’re carving my sheep wrong.” The room fell silent. “It’s a beautiful sheep, nice and curly, but my sheep looked happy.”

“Pish-posh,” said Mr. Toomey. “Sheep are sheep. They cannot look happy.”

“Mine did,” said Thomas. “They knew they were with the Baby Jesus, so they were happy.”

That evening, after Thomas and his mother went home, the woodcarver ate his supper of corn bread and boiled potatoes and carved until his eyelids drooped shut.

A few days later, another knock at the door. There stood the widow and her son. “May I watch again? I will be quiet,” said Thomas. His mother laid a basket of sweet-smelling raisin buns on the table.

After a very long time, Thomas whispered, “Mr. Toomey, is that my cow you’re carving?”

He received a nod and a grunt.



“Mr. Toomey, that is a beautiful cow, the most beautiful cow I’ve ever seen, but it’s not right. My cow looked proud.”

“Pish-posh,” growled the woodcarver. “Cows are cows. They cannot look proud.”

“My cow did. It knew that Jesus chose to be born in its barn, so it was proud.”

Later that evening, after a supper of boiled potatoes and raisin buns, the woodcarver worked until his eyelids drooped shut.

On it went. Every few days Thomas and his mother dropped by. Next, it was the angel the woodcarver was carving. This time, Thomas explained that his “angel looked like one of God’s most important angels, because it was sent to Baby Jesus.”

“And just how does one make an angel look important?” the woodcarver asked back.

“You’ll be able to do it. You’re the best in the valley,” was Thomas’ sweet reply.

After a long time, Thomas got up the nerve to ask one more question. “Will you please teach me to carve?”

The woodworker grumbled something about being a very busy man, but he put down the wood and tools, and helped Thomas sketch out a bird. Then, together, they started to slowly smooth the edges of the wood into curves.

Later, after a supper of boiled potatoes and molasses cookies from the widow McDowell, the woodcarver picked up the angel and carved until his eyelids drooped shut.

Over the next several days, he worked on the wise men and Joseph. Thomas explained that the wise men were wearing the most wonderful clothes to visit the baby king, and Joseph was leaning over Baby Jesus like he was protecting him.

A few days later, on Christmas Eve, the woodcarver said to Thomas, “I’m about to begin the last two figures – Mary and the baby. Can you tell me how your figures looked?”

“They were the most special of all,” said Thomas. “Jesus was smiling and reaching up to his mother, and Mary looked like she loved him very much.”

Before they left, the boy and his mom gave Jonathan two parcels. Inside one was a red scarf, hand-knit, warm and bright. He tied the scarf around his neck. The other parcel held a robin, crudely carved of pine. A smile twitched at the corner of Jonathan’s mouth as he ran his fingers



over the lopsided wings. He dusted the fireplace mantel with his sleeve and placed the robin exactly in the center, so he could look at it from his chair.

The woodcarver did not eat supper that night. Instead, he began to sketch the final figures, Mary and Jesus. He drew Mary, then he wadded the sketch into a ball and tossed it on the floor. He drew the baby, wadded the sketch into a ball, and tossed it with the first. He sketched again and again. Soon, there was a small mountain of crumpled papers at his feet.

When he heard the church bells announcing the midnight Christmas service, he got up. Slowly, he opened a drawer and lifted out a rough woolen shawl, a tiny white baby blanket and a little pair of blue socks. He placed each piece gently on the floor. From the bottom of the drawer he lifted out a picture frame, beautifully carved of deep-brown chestnut wood.

In the frame was a charcoal sketch of a woman sitting in a rocking chair, holding a baby. The baby's arms were reaching up, touching the woman's face. The woman was looking down at the baby, smiling. Jonathan sat down in his rocking chair and held the picture against his chest. He rocked slowly, his eyes closed. Two tears trailed down his beard.

When he finally took the picture to his workbench and began to carve, his fingers worked quickly and surely. He carved all through the night.

The next day, there was a knock on the widow McDowell's door.

When she opened it, there stood the woodcarver, his neck wrapped in a red scarf, holding a wooden box stuffed with straw.

From the box, Jonathan unpacked two curly sheep, happy sheep because they were with Jesus. He unpacked a proud cow and an angel, a very important angel with mighty wings stretching from his shoulders right down to the hem of his gown. He unpacked three wise men wearing their most wonderful clothes, edged with fur and falling in rich folds.

He unpacked a serious and caring Joseph. He unpacked Mary wearing a rough woolen shawl, looking down, loving her precious baby son. Jesus was smiling and reaching up to touch his mother's face.

That day, Jonathan went to the Christmas service with the widow McDowell and Thomas. And that day in the churchyard the village children saw Jonathan throw back his head, his eyes clear and bright, and laugh. No one ever called him Mr. Gloomy again.



The fourth Sunday of Advent draws us to the gift and miracle of love. This is stuff of romance or sentiment, but the kind of patient, persistent, embodied love that can soften what grief has hardened. This is the kind of love that comes from a God willing to risk incarnation, becoming one of us, and an unwed mother who treasures and ponders, know what a risk her “yes” might mean.

God enters the world the way love does, vulnerable and small.

Mary’s “yes” did not erase her fear. Jonathan Toomey’s healing did not erase his grief. But love made room for both.

Tonight, we will hold our fifth annual Longest Night service. It’s a time of Advent worship for people who may be grieving or feeling the absence of something or someone this Christmas season. It’s a reminder that even in the places where we hurt the most, even in places we’ve closed off to others or maybe even to ourselves, that there is still room to allow love to enter in.

Because the miracle we celebrate this Christmas is not that God came once a long, long time ago, but that God still comes. God still comes into ordinary lives, into our fear and uncertainty, and even into wounded hearts. God’s love is a miracle.

I John reminds us, using Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, “No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and his love becomes complete in us—perfect love!”

Love, once welcomed in, can change everything. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Susan Wojciechowski and Patrick James Lynch (Illustrator). *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. 1st U.S. ed. Candlewick Press, 1995.

