

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**“Images of God” ~ God Incarnate**  
**December 20, 2020**  
**Cross of Glory Lutheran Church**  
**Brooklyn Center, MN**

**PRELUDE**

**WELCOME**

“Break open our imaginations this Advent, O God, that we might see a world decisively shaped by your love.” This is a line of an Advent prayer written by theologian Walter Brueggemann, and one that I think is fitting for the journey we’ve taken together here at Cross of Glory this Advent, a journey of “breaking open our imaginations” as we’ve looked for images of God in the world around us.

Now, if you’ve been tuning into worship these past few weeks, you know that scripture is full of all kinds of images or metaphors for God that stir our imaginations: Tree, bread, fire, beekeeper, comedian, physician, criminal, rock, laughter—among dozens and dozens of others. The *abundance* of images suggests that our language and our imaginations don’t allow us to fully grasp the divine. These images tell us that God is multifaceted (literally, “of many faces”), too complex and mysterious to be captured in any one image or name, for as soon as we settle on one image for God, Scripture challenges us to see God in another way—sometimes, interestingly, even in the opposite way! Right when we think God is lion, he’s lamb. Just when we say God is king, he’s servant. As soon as we’ve decided God is light, he’s darkness. Right when we settle on God as comforter, he’s judge. The moment we call God father, she’s mother. The divine images throughout the Bible simultaneously help us know God better *and* keep us guessing about who God is, reminding us that God simply too big for our imaginations.

But exploring these many biblical images is a practice of exercising and expanding our imaginations (a central task of the Christian). At the beginning of Advent, I talked about three reasons *why* looking at these different images of God is important for us as people of faith, and as we conclude Advent today, I want to mention those again:

First, they invite us to re-imagine God. God starts showing up to us not just at worship or Bible study but in our commute home from work when we pass by a barren field and remember that God is shepherd, or in our morning coffee when we hold a clay mug in our hands and remember that God is potter, or in an old gray sweatshirt, when we put it on and remember that God is one who clothes us, like a weaver.

Second, these images invite us to re-imagine ourselves. Genesis 1:26 claims that we are made in the *imago Dei*—the image of God—which means that every time we come across an image of God in the Bible, we also encounter a reflected image of ourselves. What does it say about us, for example, that God is shepherd, or potter, or weaver?

And finally, these images invite us to re-imagine the world around us. They can actually change the way we see each other, or perhaps “the other.” There are, in other words, social and political consequences to these images. As theologians Mary Daly and Judith Plaskow have noted, the characteristics we attribute to God are the ones (whether knowingly or not) that we value most in the world around us (and perhaps conversely, it’s what we value that we take God to be). For example, if God is a property-owner (as in the parables of the vineyard that we read earlier this fall), we will admire people who own houses or land (Winner). Or if we call God father, then we’ll tend to associate godliness with men, which actually changes the way we relate to men—and conversely, women. But if we instead focus on God as a homeless man (as Matt 8:20 or Luke 9:58 describe), we might encounter our homeless neighbors differently. Or if we see God as a refugee (as we read in Matthew 2:1-23, the text immediately following the Christmas story when the holy family had to flee to Egypt for fear they King Herod would kill them), perhaps we’ll see our migrant and refugee neighbors through new eyes. These images, in other words, not only

help us *imagine* differently, but they can help us *live* differently as a result, actually changing on the ground the way we encounter those around us as bearers of God's image.

Some images of God may surprise or startle us. Pastures and clay and clothing maybe aren't the places we'd expect to find the Almighty God of the Universe, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Today's "image" may not be any less surprising. A human baby—God incarnate—isn't how anyone expected God to show up. As Lutheran theologian Soren Kierkegaard put it: God might as well have shown up as a "very rare and tremendously large green bird" rather than as a homeless rabbi. Or as Methodist pastor and author Will Willimon put it: "God surprised us by appearing in human form, even more, as a person who looked suspiciously like the annoying guy next door, an undeniably human person who hungered, thirsted, rejoiced, suffered, raged, wept, and died as all persons do." This is a God who wanted to know us and be known by us so badly that God took on a body and became one of us, making today's "image of God" much more than just an image. This is God in-flesh. God in-carnate. *Can you imagine?*

To quote Brueggemann's prayer again as we begin our worship together today: "Let us break open our imaginations this Advent, that we might see a world decisively shaped by God's love," a love that both is coming and *has* come.

#### Sources:

- Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).
- Willimon, William H. *Incarnation: The Surprising Overlap of Heaven and Earth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013).
- Winner, Lauren. *Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God* (New York, NY: HarperOne Publishers, 2015).

## CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS

Blessed be God Emmanuel, whose forgiveness is sure and whose steadfast love endures forever.

**Amen.**

Let us take a moment of silence to honestly and humbly confess our sin in the presence of God and of one another.

Loving God, **we confess that we are bound by sin. We have not welcomed the stranger, we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, we have dismissed your presence around us, we have not been Christ to one another. Forgive us, O God. Wake us up and turn us from our sin to live in the love that is incarnate in your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.**  
**Amen.**

People of God, hear this good news: by God's endless grace, your sins are forgiven and you are free—free from all that holds you back, and free to live in the gift of God's incarnate love. Be moved by God's presence, † comforted by Christ's peace, and accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

## LIGHTING OF THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE

### MUSIC      **Bring Many Names**    verses 1-4

Bring many names,  
Beautiful and good,  
Celebrate in parable and story.  
Holiness in glory,  
Living, loving God.  
Hail and hosanna!  
Bring many names.

God with us,  
Christ, Emmanuel,  
Soon a babe incarnate in a manger.  
While we wait your coming,  
be with us now.  
Hail and hosanna!  
Bring many names.

Great living God  
Never fully known.  
Joyful darkness,  
far beyond our seeing.  
Closer yet than breathing,  
everlasting home.  
Hail and hosanna!  
Bring many names.

God who sends us forth  
Into the world,  
Help us see your image in each other.  
Open us up to  
seeing you anew.  
Hail and hosanna!  
Bring many names.

**PRAYER OF THE DAY** The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**

*Let us pray . . .* **Incarnate God, you risked coming down to earth that we might have love. Help us to risk living out this love, for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who was, and is, and is to come. We pray in the name of the God of many names, Amen.**

**READING: 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.

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

<sup>46b</sup>My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup>my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup>for you, Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed:  
<sup>49</sup>you, the Almighty, have done great things for me  
and holy is your name.  
<sup>50</sup>You have mercy on those who fear you,  
from generation to generation.  
<sup>51</sup>You have shown strength with your arm  
and scattered the proud in their conceit,  
<sup>52</sup>casting down the mighty from their thrones  
and lifting up the lowly.  
<sup>53</sup>You have filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.  
<sup>54</sup>You have come to the aid of your servant Israel,  
to remember the promise of mercy,  
<sup>55</sup>the promise made to our forbears,  
to Abraham and his children forever.

The Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

## REFLECTION I

Rev. Ali Tranvik

Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to use our imaginations for a moment as we ponder the passages from Luke we read a few moments ago. Imagine, she says, the conversation that happened in the heavens when God first told the angels of God's plan to become incarnate, to come among us as a baby. Here's how *she* imagines the angels responding to God:

*Hmmm. Very interesting, God. Definitely unexpected, we'll give you that! Could you at least create yourself as a magical baby with special powers, though? It wouldn't take much—just like, the power to become invisible, or maybe the power to hurl bolts of lightning if the need arose?* The angels all felt that God's baby idea was intriguing, but it seemed to lack, shall we say, adequate safety features. God thanked the angels for their concern but said no, God was going to just be a regular baby.

There was a risk, a big risk, in coming to the world in this form: a Jewish baby, born outside wedlock to a nobody teenager and poor carpenter, born in a barn filled with animals (and all the unpleasant things that come with animals), born in the backwater town of Bethlehem. People might miss God, looking for God among things lofty, not lowly. People might dismiss him. They might despise him, perhaps even kill him. You see, Jesus was also born at a time when King Herod was in power, a tyrant who shortly after Jesus' birth, slaughtered all the babies in and around Bethlehem, having heard that there may be a threat to his power (Matt 2:1-23).

If God actually came down as a regular baby—no superpowers included—God would be at the mercy of God's creatures. People would be able to do anything they wanted. There would be no escape if things turned sour (Taylor). The incarnation was a *risk*.

But that was part of what God wanted us to know—that God was willing to risk everything to get close to us in hopes that we might have love, and that we might love in return (Taylor).

Author Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem called "The Risk of Birth" (also included in this month's Glory Banner) that I want to share again with you now. It's called "The Risk of Birth."

This is no time for a child to be born,  
with the earth betrayed by war and hate,  
and a comet slashing the sky to warn  
that time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,  
in a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
honor and truth were trampled to scorn—  
yet here did the Savior make His home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
and by a comet the sky is torn—  
yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

God came down that we might have Love, and that we may love in return.

**Sources:**

- Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Daring Plan," *Bread of Angels* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997).
- Madeleine L'Engle "The Risk of Birth," *Christmas*, 1973.

## MUSIC

#253

## He Came Down

1 He came down that we might have love;  
He came down that we might have love;  
He came down that we might have love;  
Hallelujah forevermore!

3 He came down that we might give love;  
He came down that we might give love;  
He came down that we might give love;  
Hallelujah forevermore!

2 He came down that we might know love;  
He came down that we might know love;  
He came down that we might know love;  
Hallelujah forevermore!

4 He came down that we might live love:  
He came down that we might live love:  
He came down that we might live love:  
Hallelujah forevermore!

## REFLECTION II                      Rev. Ali Tranvik

The theme of risk in Christianity does not end with the incarnation. That's where it begins. In today's second passage from Luke, we see Mary take a risk in response to God's risk. Mary risked saying "yes" to a—let's be honest—totally absurd (not to mention impossible) proposition: to birth God.

Mary's "yes" to God comes in the form of a song, often referred to as the Magnificat. It's a beautiful song illustrating Mary's faithfulness, her courage, and her trust in God. But her musical words also suggest that God's incarnate presence among us is not going to be serene, per se, like a Christmas snow globe. God's presence among us is going to shake things up and unsettle the world as we know it. God's presence among us is risky, it's disruptive, it's *cutting*...

A few years ago, I was working with an artist who was installing a piece of Christmas art at my former church. It was a modern art depiction of baby Jesus, created out of layers of sheet metal and wire mesh. In the middle of the installation process, the artist suddenly drew his right hand back. Jesus, it turns out, had cut the artist, blood now running down his fingers.

We located a first aid kit and as we were getting him all patched up, I chuckled to myself about the irony: a Jesus that cuts!?! A babe in a manger is just about the *least* harmful or threatening figure I could possibly imagine.

But then I recalled the words Mary's song: words that cut. Words that threaten the rich and comfortable and powerful. Words that slice through status quo and expectation. Words that pierce our social order. Words that have consequence and cost for the powerful, but offer a sharp and pointed hope for the lowly.

But Mary's words only cut in the way they do because we have a God who became incarnate. In other words, Mary's prophetic words of justice and hope depend on a God who comes into the world to fulfill them. A God who operates from a distance cannot do that. A God who is a disembodied spirit fluttering above and uninvolved in human life cannot do that. But this is a God who comes down, who takes on flesh, and meets us right here, in the wounds of the world. A God who offers the gift of life that similarly is not distant and faraway, but rather is a new way of living for here and now.

We have looked at many names of God this Advent. And there are many more yet to explore in Scripture. However, *this* name—the name of the incarnate God: Jesus Christ—is the one name that changes everything. It is the name that calls us into risk and into *life*. Thanks be to God!

## MUSIC                      #723 Canticle of the Turning                      verses 1, 2, 3 and 4

1 My soul cries out with a joyful shout  
that the God of my heart is great,  
and my spirit sings of the wondrous things  
that you bring to the ones who wait.  
You fixed your sight on your servant's plight,  
and my weakness you did not spurn,  
so from east to west shall my name be blest.  
Could the world be about to turn?

### Refrain

My heart shall sing of the day you bring.  
Let the fires of your justice burn.  
Wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near,  
and the world is about to turn.

2 Though I am small, my God, my all,  
you work great things in me,  
and your mercy will last from the depths of the past  
to the end of the age to be.

Your very name puts the proud to shame,  
and to those who would for you yearn,  
you will show your might, put the strong to flight,  
for the world is about to turn. **Refrain**

**3** From the halls of pow'r to the fortress tow'r,  
not a stone will be left on stone.  
Let the king beware for your justice tears  
ev'ry tyrant from his throne.  
The hungry poor shall weep no more,  
for the food they can never earn;  
there are tables spread, ev'ry mouth be fed,  
for the world is about to turn. **Refrain**

**4** Though the nations rage from age to age,  
we remember who holds us fast:  
God's mercy must deliver us  
from the conqueror's crushing grasp.  
This saving word that our forebears heard  
is the promise which holds us bound,  
till the spear and rod can be crushed by God,  
who is turning the world around. **Refrain**

### CONFESSION OF FAITH            Apostles' Creed

**I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

### PRAYERS of the PEOPLE

*Even when we are physically apart, we trust that our embodied God draws us together as one body in prayer, so let us pray now for the church, the world, and all those in need...*

Incarnate God, we give you thanks for coming to us in Jesus, for the embodied gift of love. As we continue to discern what it means to be your body, especially in the midst of this pandemic, equip us to live in this love, that we too would have courage like Mary to say "yes" to your call. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Holy Spirit, today as we read of the impossible pregnancies of Mary and Elizabeth, we pray for mothers of all kinds--for those who are expecting, those who are struggling with infertility or miscarriage, those who have lost a child, those whose children are fostered or adopted or biological, for all those who love in a motherly way. We also pray for mother earth, for the nourishment and care she provides us. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God our King, your disruptive reign is portrayed in Mary's prophetic song. Help us to seek out and to listen the prophetic voices around us today--voices that, like Mary's, are often deemed insignificant or unqualified. Attune our ears and open our hearts, that we might encounter you in these voices and magnify you. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Mighty One, Mary sings of a world in which "the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled with good things and the wealthy are sent away empty." And yet we live in a world in which the lowly are oppressed and the hungry continue to yearn for bread; a world in which workers are exploited and the poor are evicted; a world in which people are dying of the pandemic of Covid-19 and the pandemic of loneliness it has caused; a world in which our elderly neighbors are often dismissed or ignored; a world in which white supremacy continues to do violence; a world in which so many of our neighbors don't have a place to call home. Guide us as we work to make your kingdom come, here and now. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

God-with-us, as Christmas nears, a time when we celebrate hope, joy, and love incarnate, many of us find ourselves grieving, alone, angry, or afraid. Be with all those who are struggling this season. We pray for Gil Hartlage, Terry Stejskal, Vicky Jacobson, Claudia Reitan, Jeannie Kuzmich, John Thomson, the Balzar family as Lori's nephew continues to recover from Covid-19, for the family of Arlene Kosek as they grieve the loss of Arlene's cousin, and for the Hengel

family in the wake of their daughter's recent surgery. O Come o come, Emmanuel. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Draw near to us, O God, and receive our prayers for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.  
**Amen.**

## LORD'S PRAYER

*And now let us pray together the prayer that Jesus taught us...*

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

## ART REFLECTION

### BLESSING

As we prepare for God incarnate to come into our world this Advent season, may the God who is already with us, Emmanuel, surprise you with his presence and as you go forth. **Amen**

### SENDING SONG #244 Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers verses 1, 3 and 4

**1** Rejoice, rejoice, believers,  
and let your lights appear;  
the evening is advancing,  
and darker night is near.  
The bridegroom is arising  
and soon is drawing nigh.  
Up, pray and watch and wrestle;  
at midnight comes the cry.

**3** The saints, who here in patience  
their cross and suff'rings bore,  
shall live and reign forever  
when sorrow is no more.  
Around the throne of glory  
the Lamb they shall behold;  
in triumph cast before him  
their diadems of gold.

**4** Our hope and expectation,  
O Jesus, now appear;  
arise, O Sun so longed for,  
o'er this benighted sphere.  
With hearts and hands uplifted,  
we plead, O Lord, to see  
the day of earth's redemption  
that sets your people free!

### DISMISSAL

Go in peace in the name of our incarnate God.

**Thanks be to God.**

### POSTLUDE

The Order of Service is from Evangelical Lutheran Worship which is commended for use in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

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## **Worship Leadership:**

Lead Pastor: Rev. Ali Tranvik  
Pianist, vocalist: Mark Trease  
Vocalist, choir director: Keith Williams  
Lector: Dawn Bailey  
Acolyte: Earl Simons  
Technical: Ryan Bailey  
Ministers: The people of Cross of Glory

**We invite you to make an offering by sending a check to the church or by visiting our new, secure online giving page which can be found at the bottom of our home page: [www.crossofglory.us](http://www.crossofglory.us). Thanks for your support!**

<p><b>Congregational Support as of 11/30/2020</b> <b>Annual Budget: \$225,000.00</b> <b>Year to Date Budgeted: \$204,741.67</b> <b>Year to Date Received: \$206,347.29</b> <b>Difference: \$1,605.62</b></p>
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## **Community Announcements:**

- Following Zoom worship, join us for Virtual Coffee Hour, a weekly opportunity for small group fellowship. Refill on coffee and join us as you're able!
- If you haven't yet had the chance to mail back your 2021 pledge card, please do so and remember to hand-write your name on the front or back of the card or return envelope. Thank you for your continued generosity in supporting God's work here at Cross of Glory!
- Bible Study will gather Tuesday morning at 9:30 am on Zoom. Join us by calling in using the same Zoom information we use for worship on Sundays.
- Based on the Covid-19 cases-per-10,000 rate our area, Cross of Glory continues to operate under "Level 1" of our Response and Preparedness Plan, meaning all church gatherings will continue virtually for the time being, with the exception of building maintenance, essential volunteers, and staff. The Covid-19 Task Force will continue to monitor cases and provide ongoing information as circumstances develop. Please reach out to the Task Force with any questions!
- Although the pandemic has prevented in-person choral concerts this year, Lutheran colleges throughout the area invite you to take part in their virtual Advent and Christmas concerts throughout the month of December. Concerts are free, open to the public, and may require registering in advance. For more info, visit <https://mpls-synod.org/news/this-advent-season-art-wins/>.
- On Sunday, Dec 27, Cross of Glory will be joining together with fellow ELCA churches throughout the synod in a joint worship service led by synod staff, with Bishop Ann Svennungsen preaching. Join us on Zoom at 9:30 am.
- We are excited to welcome Rev. Mark Tranvik, Professor of Reformation History and Theology at Luther Seminary and former pastor at Cross of Glory, as our guest preacher on Sunday, Jan 3.
- Pastor Ali is available for pastoral care and prayer. Reach out anytime at [atranvik@crossofglory.us](mailto:atranvik@crossofglory.us) or 763-533-8602.