

Date: December 20, 2015
 Scriptures: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 1:39-55
 Title: Raise a Tent of Shelter Now

Our journey to Bethlehem is nearly over.
 Soon and very soon,
 we will kneel before the Christ-child
 and lift our voices in thanksgiving
 with the heavenly chorus.

Along the way,
 we have explored what it means to be
 a people of hope, peace, and joy.
 Today, we focus our attention on love,
 which according to the apostle Paul
 is the greatest of virtues.

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of love.
 English poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote to Robert, her husband,
 “I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
 For the ends of being and ideal grace.
 I love thee to the level of every day’s
 Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.”

Physicist, mathematician, and Christian philosopher,
 Blaise Pascal said,
 “Love has reasons no reason can explain.”

Argentinian poet, Pablo Neruda, wrote,
 “I love you without knowing
 how or when or from where.
 I love you straightforwardly,
 without complexities or pride;
 so I love you because I know
 no other way than this;
 where I do not exist, nor you,
 so close that your hand
 on my chest is my hand,
 so close that your eyes close
 as I fall asleep.” (Sonnet XVII).

What is love?
 Is it a passionate feeling or a conscious decision?
 Or, is it both?
 Both rational and irrational?

Can love be seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelled?
 Either consciously or unconsciously,
 we each determine for ourselves what love is
 and what love is not.

That determination has a profound impact
 on how we live our lives and relate to others.

Recently, I heard a story on NPR,
 which was originally recorded by Storycorps.
 Chloe Longfellow spoke about her grandmother, Doris Louise Rolison.

“Because her mother was away often,
 Chloe spent a great deal of time at her grandparents
 and grew especially close to her grandmother.

Her grandmother had red hair.
 Although it was out of a bottle,
 it was still red hair.

She was a spitfire.
 If you said or did something she thought was wrong,
 she would tell you.

But, she always smiled with her eyes,
 even when she was angry or tired.
 Her grandmother was her very first best friend.

“Chloe learned many life lessons from her grandmother
 as they worked together in the kitchen.

Most importantly,
 she learned about acceptance
 and how to be a good human being,

Her grandmother would get all the ingredients
 for a soup together.

Then, she'd say,
 ‘See honey, this is how the world works.
 Some people are onions,
 and some people are potatoes.
 It would be a really boring soup
 if you just had potatoes in there, wouldn't it?
 But, if you add leeks, if you add some bacon,
 you have this really wonderful thing.
 All these different people come together
 to make this wonderful thing called our world.’

“One time she had beets growing in her garden.
 Together, they picked and cleaned them.

Chloe always got to turn the page in the cookbook.
 That day, as she turned the page,
 her beet-stained hand left a print
 in her grandmother's favorite cookbook.
 Chloe started to cry,
 because she thought she had ruined it.

To her surprise,
 her grandmother took a piece of a beet,
 wiped it across the palm of her hand,
 and placed her hand alongside Chloe's
 so their thumbs touched.

Then her grandmother said,
 'It's perfect now.'

When Chloe misses her grandmother,
 she opens the cookbook and goes to that page.

She says,

'My grandmother touched it so often,
 it still smells like her.' " (Chloe Longfellow, Story Corps story, NPR, Morning Edition,

12.11.15)

The love Chloe has for her grandmother is neither this nor that,
 but rather a melding of this and that.
 It is both feeling and conscious decision,
 which can be seen, and heard, and touched, and tasted and smelled,
 for love makes whole our disparate lives.
 As love makes our lives whole,
 it also makes our lives holy.

When Mary makes her way
 to her cousin Elizabeth's hill country home,
 the angel Gabriel has visited both women
 and told them they will each bear a child,
 who will change the course of human history.

How very different the two women are.

Elizabeth is old,
 nearer the end of her life than its beginning.

Mary is young,
 only recently having made the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Elizabeth is married to a priest,
 who serves in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Mary is unmarried.

We have to wonder why Mary undertakes the journey.
 Elizabeth lives some 80 miles away from Mary's home.
 To get to Elizabeth's house,
 Mary has to walk for three days,
 and Mary cannot make the journey by herself.
 Roman soldiers heavily patrol the entire region.
 A lone female walking about the countryside
 runs the risk of being molested by them.
 To ensure her safety,
 her father or an older brother would have had to accompany her.
 And certainly, Mary's mother was far more knowledgeable
 about pregnancy and childbirth than Elizabeth,
 who was pregnant for the first time.

Perhaps, Mary make the long, arduous, potentially dangerous journey
 because she needs to get out of Dodge ~
 needs to get away from the wagging tongues
 and scornful looks
 and the anger
 that always rears its ugly head
 whenever anyone fails to conform
 to the community's values and mores.
 Going to visit Elizabeth was both the safe thing to do
 and also the wise thing to do,
 for Elizabeth knew a thing or two
 about dealing with unkind, inconsiderate people.
 She had dealt with people like that most of her married life
 for not being able to have children.

Soon after the two women meet,
 Elizabeth, prompted by her unborn son,
 declares Mary to the most blessed among women,
 for she is pregnant with God's child.

Hearing Elizabeth's blessing,
 Mary to burst out in song, saying,
 "My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices God my Savior."

Her song, the Magnificat,
 declares both her trust in and love for God.
 Though she is young, marginalized, an unwed mother-to-be,
 Mary sees straight to the heart of God.
 She knows that God loves all people
 and acts to right the world

by overturning systems that oppress people
 and bringing down the arrogant, the corrupt, the greedy
 and restoring justice and peace.

Wise beyond her years,

Mary realizes that God transforms the world through people
 and will do exactly that through her.

In his song, "Dance Me to the End of Love,
 Leonard Cohen says,

"Raise a tent of shelter though every thread is torn."

I think that is a wonderfully apt description of God's love for us.

Minute by minute,

day in and day out,

century after century,

God raises a tent of shelter over us.

Regardless of our response to God,

regardless of how we pick and tear at the relationship,

God loves us still and reaches out to us

with compassionate, forgiving love.

This love came down at Christmas time.

For a brief moment in time,

holy love lived and walked the face of the earth.

It could be seen and heard and touched and tasted and smelled.

It flared brightly for all the world to see.

Today, God births Christ's holy love

in our hearts.

God does this

that we might live differently in the world.

Though the threads of our lives may be torn and tattered,

God can mend them

and make us whole and holy

and transform us to become a tent of shelter

for those God brings into our lives.

And we?

We are the most blessed of people. Amen.

