**Love the Rose**

Luke 3:1-6 December 8, 2024 GRCC

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Something I don’t admit very often is that in my 20’s for seven years I lived in a Zen Center, studying and practicing meditation. We would practice twice a day and for an entire weekend each month, teaching ways to return to stillness, balance and the simplicity of nature. Part of this practice, in addition to sitting meditation, was chanting. The chants were not in English and were the same day after day – so that after a few months I knew them by heart. When asked what the meaning of this chanting was, our teacher said that it expresses ‘great love, great sadness.’ Great love, great sadness.

Sounds a bit strange right? Why do that to yourself? But consider our lives, and how they are filled not only with love, joy, and beauty, but also with loss, tragedy, brokenness and decay. So, this practice reflects reality. It teaches us how to come into harmony with it. Great love, great sadness.

I’d argue that our hymns and our worship also express great love and great sadness. Part of the beauty of our hymnody and our prayers is that they do not shy away from the grief and loss that we experience in this life. Worship and great music are honest about hardships and sorrow, fear and pain – and they guide us to look toward hope, community, compassion and faith to carry us toward healing and wholeness. The Bible does this too – bringing us ancient writings and stories that show us the worst of suffering and loss – balanced with examples of people coping with courage and faith.

 On the wall of my meditation space at home is the print of a medieval painting of a crucifix that I picked up at the Vatican when I was a student in Rome many years ago. It is a traditional image of our crucified savior nailed to the cross in vivid colors, with Mary in tears on one side and the disciple John in distress on the other. At the base of the cross is a skull and bones, and the scene is set in a lovely landscape of cypress trees and a bright blue sky with clouds. It portrays profound beauty and terrible agony, devotion and loss, holiness and sorrow. Our faith reveals the absolute wonder, mystery, and glory of our lives alongside its tragedies and misery. Great love, great sadness.

 Love the Rose is on the way. Throughout Christian history the red rose has been a symbol of Christ - not only the unfolding of grace and beauty, but also of blood shed on the cross and the red blood of the martyrs.

We hear it in the Christmas song *“Lo, how the rose ere blooming.”* Roses were grown in monastery gardens for medicinal purposes. The mystic rose appears in Dante's [*Divine Comedy*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_Comedy), where it represents God's love. By the twelfth century, the red rose had come to represent [Christ's passion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passion_%28Christianity%29). It also represents the virgin Mary, the ‘rose without thorns.’ The symbol of the rose represents beauty intertwined with suffering.

In this Advent season we live in this tension: inspiration and sorrow, hope and despair. In our scripture reading this morning, we hear of John the Baptist, the one who prepares the way for the messiah, and who baptizes Jesus. But John is soon arrested by King Herod and brutally killed soon after Jesus begins his ministry. After Mary receives her annunciation by Gabriel with the joyful news that she is going to have a baby, Joseph decides to divorce her. King Herod hears about the prophesies of the messiah’s birth and tries to trick the wise men into telling him where the baby is so that he can kill him. Then he ends up slaughtering hundreds of babies in an effort to snuff out his rival. The wise men bring gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, with myrrh being an herb for embalming – foreseeing Jesus’ death. In these stories we find spiritual joy and uplift, with a backdrop of suffering and grief, the red rose and the thorn.

Love the rose blooms also in our own lives. We struggle with tragedies and fear, dangerous health issues and family crises, worries for our children, our older parents, relatives or friends. Here in this church we celebrate the joy of this season, while still mourning the leaving of a beloved pastor and the pain of transition. We feel the dark and cold. Christmas is not all candy-canes and laughter; it has its share of broken glass and tears. Lurking behind the comfort, the lights, the gatherings of the season are unhealed wounds, dark memories, uncertainties and anxieties, as well as grief - for losses of loved ones, or youth, or health or status. All is not joy and peace, but mixed with sadness and fear.

 Rev. David Buttrick tells about two Christmas cards that he received one year. One had a traditional manger scene on the front, including a depiction of Jesus as a plump, cherubic infant. Inside that card were the words, "May the Christ child come into your heart at Christmas." The second card he received was from a children's aid organization. On the front of that card was a picture of a starving child in Africa, with a stomach bloated from malnutrition. Inside were the words, "Save the children." At Christmas we balance these two realities, spiritual comfort balanced with brutal realties of suffering and sorrow.

Love the Rose is here. The message we find today is that Jesus comes as our Savior - not to stop our tears - but to share our tears with us. God does not sit far away in judgement, but God comes as Immanuel to be with us, to enter into our sorrow and our difficulties and to suffer with us. God comes as a helpless babe, vulnerable to the pains and terrors of this world; not insulated and defended against every hurt. Jesus comes as the rose – embracing birth and death, showing his love by entering into death and sorrow, shedding his red blood so that we might find a way through our tears and hopelessness.

The Rose of sorrow and suffering, know so well by Jesus, by Mary, by so many in our time - is also the flower that blooms with delicate beauty and exquisite fragrance. Jesus taught that perfect love casts out fear. Love creates room for hope. At the very bottom of Pandora’s box, after all of the worst evils and plagues and monsters slither out, a tiny fairy appears, twinkling with light – and that is hope. Hope is here, even in the midst of our fears and anxieties, to remind us that life holds possibilities for the good. Hope is the fragile seedling that breaks through frozen ground in the spring. Hope is the bright red rose unfolding from a small green bud. Hope is white blood cells of the immune system at war against viruses, infections and disease. Hope keeps a key under the mat by the front door, just in case our long-lost love returns home. Hope reveals the truth of great sadness and deep love. Hope lets in light.

Robert Fulghum was once at a meeting where he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to ask a question and so he asked, "What is the meaning of life?" He said the usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. But then, the organizer Dr. Alexander Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at Robert for a long time, asking with his eyes if he was serious and seeing from his eyes that he was, said, *"I will answer your question.'"*

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small, round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this*:*

*"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone, I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine - in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.*

*"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light - truth, understanding, knowledge - is there, and it will only shine in dark places if I reflect it.*

*"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world - into the black places in the hearts of men - and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. That is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."*

Bringing hope and light and love is the meaning of life. The beauty of the rose is what it shines reconciliation and peace into dark places of brutality, hatred and sadness. The rose of Jesus’ blood, his suffering and sorrow bring to light our own wounds and betrayals and grief. This rose also portrays the love of God who enters into our gloomy shadows, our deepest pain, our despair and tears – and offers hope. Hope pushes us to create a new way – an alternative to fear, callousness and hate. This is the rose of great love and great sadness. From dirt and mud grows a fragrant flower. Love the rose is on the way! Amen