“Love Can’t Wait”

Matthew 1: 18-25

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The Bible is rife with tales of courageous people. It seems the Old Testament speaks more often of courage than it speaks of love. Bold Moses standing in front of Pharaoh and demanding he release the enslaved Jews. Adolescent David, armed with a few stones, quivering bravely in front of giant Goliath. Naomi, after the death of her husband and sons, returning empty handed and empty hearted to her hometown. Noah, building an ark in front of his laughing neighbors. Esther, out-manipulating the maniacal Haman to stop genocide. Daniel worshipping God while headed to the lion’s den. Jacob, wrestling all night until his hip breaks. These people are all courageous to risk their reputations and their lives.

And in the New Testament? John the Baptist speaking truth to power and literally losing his head. Stephen preaching the good news until he’s crushed by stones. Disciples leaving everything they know in their world to follow this compelling stranger, Jesus. The unclean, hemorrhaging woman daring to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment.

And nothing is more courageous than surrendering to the authorities and walking to your own crucifixion?

Today’s Matthew reading is the very first chapter of the New Testament. And it, too, is a story of courage. A pregnant teenage girl. Her seemingly betrayed spouse who, instead of condemning her, remains by her side. A man giving his family name to a child he did not father.

These are all Bible stories of courage.

All this bluster about heroes and bravery in scripture is just another way to tell a story of love. This advent we’ve asked, “What can’t wait?” Courage. Integrity. Faith. Love.

What can’t wait? Love can’t wait. Daniel loved God. Esther loved her people. David loved his family, his king, his nation. John the Baptist loved the promise of hope. Stephen loved his Savior. People don’t do courageous things without conviction. Courage is built on loyalty and trust and sacrifice and promise. ***Courage rises up from love.*** This morning, let’s consider together three types of courage born of love. A love that can’t wait.

In Matthew 1, love slips into this world almost invisibly, without a parade or a medal ceremony or a giant bang. An angel appears to Mary when she is alone and confides that she will carry the world’s future in her womb. An angel of the Lord tells a dreaming Joseph to not be afraid. And Luke’s gospel says Jesus the Christ was born in a stable, with Mary and Joseph most likely alone, scared, and desperate, just like any first-time parents delivering a child without benefit of experience or assistance. The raucous glory of the Lord that shone all around was with the shepherds in a far-away field. The star that shone brightly to the wise men was too distant to warm the barn, to provide light for this young couple bringing new life into the world. In the stable, this was a silent night.

One type of courage is as silent as that holy night. There are times when it takes guts to be silent. The gospel of Luke says the shepherds “made known abroad” their experience with the Messiah. But Mary, the young woman who had pushed and strained to give birth to a miracle . . . Mary silently “pondered these things in her heart.” While the shepherds proclaimed, Mary quietly nursed her newborn. Maybe her mother’s intuition sensed that this tiny child would live a life filled with shouted questions, growing mobs, tumult, betrayal and in the end, violence. To survive such a big life, her little boy would need a calm, soothing, thoughtful place—or person-- of refuge. Maybe Mary’s greatest courage was in her choice to, for the next 33 years, be that refuge for Jesus: a place of steadiness, quiet, calm, and unconditional love.

Author and theologian Parker Palmer has written many books, and I commend every one of them to you. In a late chapter of Let Your Life Speak,[[1]](#footnote-1) Palmer recalls a period of time when he was languishing in a deep depression. One friend came by his home regularly and sat silently with him, wordlessly massaging his feet. This man did not ask anything of the depressed Palmer. He did not offer solutions, make long observations, share inspirational stories or in any way try to “fix” Palmer. This man was content to simply *be* with his friend. Palmer writes, “By standing respectfully and faithfully at the borders of another’s solitude, we may mediate the love of God to a person who needs something deeper than any human being can give.”[[2]](#footnote-2) “Blessedly,” Parker continues, “there were several people . . . who had the courage to stand with me in a simple and healing way.” It takes courage to love quietly. As Mary and Parker Palmer’s friend show us, one way to love is to have the courage to be silent.

A second way to love courageously is to *not* be silent. It takes immense courage to speak up or act in difficult situations. Matthew tells us Joseph was a righteous man, so justice, ethics and observance of Torah law were important to him.[[3]](#footnote-3) Joseph resolved to quietly dismiss Mary so she might escape legalistic penalties of exclusion or death. But then an angel visits Joseph in a dream, and the angel says, “Don’t be afraid!”—which is another way of saying, “Have courage!” Joseph then did two brave things in the face of society’s displeasure. Joseph stood by Mary, despite what the neighbors were saying. And Joseph gave the child his family name, legitimizing the infant in the eyes of Jewish society and connecting Jesus to a family line that could be traced straight back to King David.[[4]](#footnote-4) The child was a gift of love from God, and Joseph’s courage in claiming Mary and naming Jesus grew out of that love.

And when would we need courage these days? You don’t have to be on the front lines of a war to be brave. Sometimes it’s standing in the foyer during a neighborhood Christmas party. It takes courage to challenge a friend who makes the thinly veiled racist joke or low-key sexist comment or homophobic reference. But if you love someone in that much maligned minority, or if you love your friend who said those harmful words, you’ll ask for clarification (“Maybe I misheard you, will you say that again?”) or challenge the stereotype (“Is that what you believe?”). Speaking up in a calm, reasonable voice is an act of courage and love. J.K. Rowling’s character Dumbledore says, “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In Genesis, Abraham dares to speak up to God on behalf of Sodom because of his love for the righteous people in that city. Imagine the nerve it takes to speak up to God? Abraham’s courage spared an entire city from utter destruction.

There’s a modern-day version of this tale.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is a tiny, teenage, autistic girl who is speaking up to power on behalf of the innocents of her generation and the generations to follow. Greta Thunberg loves humanity and her planet and is deeply concerned about survival in the shadow of global warming. And this love has given her courage. Love has given this very quiet person a voice. Last year she proposed a school strike to draw attention to the issue, saying if the people in power were not investing in her future, why should she? Though she was an army of one, this courageous waif-like fifteen-year-old printed flyers, made a poster board sign, and protested in front of Swedish Parliament. She resolved to speak up![[7]](#footnote-7)

A picture containing yellow, outdoor, building, ground

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She was alone on day one. And then on day two someone joined her. Greta says, “The moment one striker became two strikers, that was a big step.” Two became eight, which became hundreds, which became thousands. *Courage has a ripple effect.*[[8]](#footnote-8)

“Just over a year ago, a quiet and mostly friendless teenager woke up, put on her blue hoodie, and sat by herself for hours in an act of singular defiance. Fourteen months later, she had become the voice of millions, a symbol of a rising global rebellion.” Those words are from the article describing this sixteen-year-old as Time Magazine’s 2019 Person of the Year.

A person standing in front of water

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Time photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva took this photo. She says, “I was thinking, ‘How can I make a portrait that combines gentleness and at the same time courage?’”[[9]](#footnote-9)

How *could* a portrait combine gentleness and at the same time courage? Gentleness and courage. How about these? *[montage of portraits of Mary and baby Jesus]*

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The courage to be silent. The courage to speak up. And now a third type of courage that sounds counterintuitive. It is the love-empowered courage . . . to be vulnerable. Social scientist Brene Brown wrote an entire book about this idea. It’s called Daring Greatly, and I commend it to you.

Sharks are born swimming and newly hatched sea turtles make a beeline for the water, but human beings? Infants are utterly helpless. It’s not just that we can’t defend ourselves from attack; we can’t survive without help. Even the Christ child had to be lifted up to be fed. Genesis tells us God created us, out of love, in God’s own image. Matthew 1 says God here among us, the Christ child, was born just as vulnerable as every other infant. So, as we read Matthew 1, as we look at the paintings of the infant Jesus we realize: there is holiness present in that vulnerability.

Vulnerability: admitting you don’t have it all together, that you’ve made mistakes, that you’re sorry for what you said or how you behaved. It takes courage to look across the kitchen table or fly across the country and admit you’re not perfect. It’s an act of bravery to walk across the office or this sanctuary or the parking lot and say, “You matter to me. I have to own some of the stuff messed up between us. I’d like to move forward in our relationship.”

And it takes backbone to firmly say “no” to the person you’ve enabled for years so that he learns he can stand on his own two feet, or so she discovers inside herself a resilience she can trust.

It takes courage to be vulnerable enough to admit you need help. The need to be alone is normal . . . until it isn’t. Depressed people isolate. It takes courage to ask for help out of that loneliness. Help is available if you’ll admit you need it—and believe that you, a beloved child of God, deserve it. Christ himself had the disciples fetching young colts, collecting bread and fish, and protecting his need for quiet time. God loves you without question. Have the courage to admit you can’t do it all alone.

The word courage is from the Latin root “cor” which means heart. (Of course it does!) Because love stands at the very foundation of every courageous thing we do. Brene Brown says courage originally meant to “speak one’s mind by telling *all* one’s heart.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

God placed God’s very own heart in the manger Christmas Day. Imagine the courage it takes to choose to reveal yourself not as a violent conquering leader of an army who breaths fire and brimstone.

Imagine the courage it takes to be born in a stable, to an impoverished couple, in a foreign land, with no midwife or doctor present.

Imagine the courage it takes for Almighty God to show up as a vulnerable bundle of love.

It’s that love that comes to us and gives us the courage to be quiet, to speak up, to be vulnerable. It’s that love we can’t wait for this Christmas.

Because Christmas is love.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Amy Jill Levine, *Jewish Annotated New Testament,* p. 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Douglas R. A. Hare, *Feasting On The Word*, Bartlett & Brown Taylor, eds., Year A, Volume 1, Advent through Transfiguration, p. 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, Chapter 17, paragraph 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All Greta Thunberg information is from Time Magazine’s Person of the Year 2019 issue: <https://time.com/person-of-the-year-2019-greta-thunberg/>, December 21, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For Thunberg’s speech at the UN Climate Action Summit see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAJsdgTPJpU> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Brene Brown, <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2019/02/14/courage-to-speak-ones-mind-by-telling-all-ones-heart/>

   December 21, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Internet resource, December 21, 2019: <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2019/02/14/courage-to-speak-ones-mind-by-telling-all-ones-heart/> [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Sara Bareilles, *Christmas Is Love*, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQdLF1QP_-A> [↑](#footnote-ref-11)