

That's the Way of the World

Advent Reflections Through the Music of Earth, Wind & Fire

Week Four: Love as Spirit

Song Focus: "That's the Way of the World"



Centering Moment

"Child is born with a heart of gold, way of the world makes his heart grow cold."

These words from Earth, Wind & Fire capture a universal tension we all know too well. We enter this world with innocence, hope, and openness, but the weight of life's disappointments, injustices, and hardships can calcify our hearts over time. We've all felt it: the pull between what we desperately hope for and what the world actually delivers.

In this Advent season, as we prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, we're invited to reflect on this sacred tension. How do we keep our hearts tender in a hardening world? How do we remain open to love when love has cost us so much?

Take a moment to breathe deeply. Think about a time when you felt this tension acutely, when your hopes collided with harsh reality. Hold that moment gently as we begin.

Reflection Question

Have you ever felt the tension between what you hope for and what the world gives you? Where do you notice your heart growing cold, and where do you still feel warmth?

Opening Prayer

God of tender mercies, soften our hearts today. Help us receive what love requires of us, even when it disrupts our plans and challenges our assumptions. Amen.

Guiding Scriptures



Luke 1:46–55 (NRSVUE)

Mary's Magnificat: A revolutionary song of praise that proclaims God's justice and mercy, sung by a young woman carrying the world's salvation in her womb.



Matthew 1:18–25 (NRSVUE)

Joseph's Dream: The quiet obedience of a righteous man who learns that God's righteousness often looks different than religious convention.



John 1:14 (NRSVUE)

"The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

These three passages form a theological symphony. Mary's voice rises in prophetic proclamation, Joseph's heart wrestles in silent surrender, and John's Gospel declares the cosmic truth that binds them together: God chose to become flesh, to dwell among us, to make love tangible and real. Together, these scriptures invite us into the mystery of Incarnation, where divine love takes on human form and changes everything.

Mary's Response: A Love That Shouts



"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior..."

Luke 1:46–47 (NRSVUE)

Mary doesn't whisper her response to Gabriel's announcement; she erupts in revolutionary praise. Her Magnificat is not a polite hymn sung in hushed tones, it's a prophetic manifesto that rattles the foundations of empire and privilege.

Listen to what she declares: God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty. This is not sentimental love; this is disruptive, world-reordering love. Mary's love is expectant, carrying both a child and a vision of God's justice. Her love is prophetic, naming what God is doing even before the world can see it. Her love is public, refusing to keep God's work private or polite.

Reflection Question

Where in your life are you being called to shout in love? What truth is God asking you to proclaim, even when it feels risky or uncomfortable? How might your love become more public, more prophetic, more disruptive of injustice?

Joseph's Response: A Love That Listens

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly."

Matthew 1:19 (NRSVUE)

Before the angel's visit, Joseph wrestles. He knows the law, he knows what righteousness looks like in his community, and Mary's pregnancy doesn't fit the script. Yet his response reveals something profound: his love for Mary compels him toward mercy rather than judgment, toward quiet protection rather than public shaming.

Then comes the dream. An angel speaks, and Joseph's understanding of righteousness expands. He learns that God's ways often disrupt our most carefully constructed plans. Joseph's love evolves from conventional righteousness to radical obedience, from what makes sense to what God requires.

Joseph's love is quiet, not because it's weak, but because it's deep. It's protective, creating space for God's work even when he doesn't fully understand it. It's evolving, willing to be reshaped by divine encounter. His silence is not absence; it's attentive listening.

Where Mary shouts, Joseph listens. Where Mary proclaims, Joseph obeys. Both responses are forms of love, both are necessary, both are holy.

Reflection Question

Are you open to love that disrupts your plans but deepens your purpose? When has God called you to reimagine what righteousness looks like? How do you practice the kind of listening love that Joseph embodies?

That's the Way of the World

"You will find peace of mind if you look way down in your heart and soul..."

Earth, Wind & Fire gave us a love song wrapped in stark realism. They understood something profound: the world has a way of bending people, of hardening hearts that started out soft and golden. The forces of this world, systemic injustice, personal betrayal, accumulated disappointment, work to make us cynical, guarded, cold.

But the song doesn't end in despair. Instead, it offers a pathway: look way down in your heart and soul. Go deeper than the wounds. Reach past the scar tissue. Find that place where love still lives, where hope still flickers, where peace still waits to be discovered.

This is the tension of Advent. We acknowledge the way of the world, its capacity to break and harden us, while simultaneously believing that God is birthing something new. We don't deny the coldness; we defy it. We don't ignore the breaking; we believe in mending.

The Incarnation is God's ultimate answer to the way of the world. Into a world that hardens hearts, God sends a child with a heart of gold. Into a world bent on breaking, God breaks through with unbreakable love. Into a world that makes us cold, God comes as warmth, as light, as fire that cannot be extinguished.

Discussion Prompt

How do we hold on to love in a world bent on breaking hearts? What practices, communities, or spiritual disciplines help you maintain a tender heart in a hardening world?

Mary vs Joseph: Two Sides of Love

Mary: Spirit of Praise



- **Loud, Public, Prophetic:** Mary's response is visible and vocal, a song that everyone can hear
- **The Magnificat:** Her words declare God's justice and revolutionary love
- **Disruptive Joy:** Her praise disrupts social order and announces a new kingdom
- **Embodied Witness:** Her very body becomes the site of God's redemptive work

Joseph: Spirit of Surrender

- **Quiet, Private, Obedient:** Joseph's response unfolds in dreams and silent action
- **The Dream:** His encounter with God happens in the intimate space of sleep
- **Disciplined Love:** His obedience requires him to reimagine righteousness
- **Protective Presence:** His love creates space for God's work to unfold safely

Both Mary and Joseph teach us something essential about love. Mary shows us that love can be bold, public, and prophetic, refusing to be quiet about God's justice. Joseph shows us that love can be quiet, steady, and protective, making space for God's work without needing recognition.

The church needs both. We need people who shout like Mary, who proclaim God's love loudly and disruptively. We need people who listen like Joseph, who obey quietly and create safe spaces for God's work to grow. We need the prophets and the protectors, the voices and the vessels, the singers and the silent servants.

Reflection Prompt

Which one do you resonate with in this season? Are you being called to shout like Mary or to listen like Joseph? How might your faith community need both expressions of love right now?

Spirit: Earth + Wind + Fire

Throughout this Advent series, we've journeyed through the essential elements that Earth, Wind & Fire's music embodies, and that our faith requires. We began with **Hope**, that beautiful fantasy of what could be, the audacious belief that God's promises are real even when unseen. We moved to **Peace**, the devoted stillness that holds us steady when everything around us shakes. We celebrated **Joy**, that defiant gladness that rises up despite our circumstances, the party in the midst of pain.

Now we arrive at the final element: **Spirit**. This is not just another quality to add to the list; spirit is the animating force that binds all the others together. Spirit is the breath of God moving through it all, the divine energy that makes hope more than wishful thinking, peace more than mere calm, and joy more than temporary happiness.



Spirit is what transforms individual virtues into a way of life. It's what makes Advent not just a season we observe but a reality we embody. Spirit is the Holy Ghost that hovered over Mary, the divine messenger that visited Joseph, the eternal Word that became flesh. Spirit is God with us, in us, through us, making all things new.

Discussion Question

How does this final element, spirit, bind all the others together? In what ways have you experienced the Holy Spirit as the force that animates your hope, sustains your peace, and ignites your joy?

Jesus as Love in the Flesh



"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

John 1:14 (NRSVUE)

This is the revolutionary center of Christian faith: love is not just an emotion we feel or an ideal we pursue. Love became flesh. Love got dirt under its fingernails. Love felt hunger, exhaustion, grief, and joy. Love walked dusty roads, touched leprous skin, wept at gravesides, and laughed at wedding feasts.

The Incarnation tells us that God didn't send instructions about love from a safe distance. God became love in human form. Jesus shows us what love looks like when it walks, talks, touches, heals, confronts, comforts, bleeds, dies, and rises again.

This embodied love changes everything about how we understand and practice love. We can't spiritualize it away, making it only about feelings or intentions. We can't reduce it to mere words or beliefs. Jesus shows us that real love requires presence, proximity, and participation. Real love gets involved, gets messy, gets costly.

When Jesus touched the leper, he embodied love. When he wept with Mary and Martha, he embodied love. When he welcomed children, challenged the powerful, fed the hungry, and healed the sick, he was showing us that love is tangible, practical, and transformative. Love doesn't just think nice thoughts; love shows up, speaks up, and acts up when justice is denied.

And here's the scandalous beauty of it: this embodied love extends to us. We are called to be the body of Christ, to make love flesh in our own time and place. Our hands become Christ's hands, our feet become Christ's feet, our voices become Christ's voice. We become love in the flesh for a world desperate for something real.

Reflection Question

How does the Incarnation, God becoming flesh, change how we show love? In what specific, tangible ways is God calling you to embody love in your community, your family, your workplace, your world?

Real Talk Reflection

Let's get real for a moment. Both Mary and Joseph show us powerful expressions of love, but they're radically different. Mary's love is loud, public, and prophetic. She sings her truth for everyone to hear, proclaiming God's justice without apology or hesitation. Joseph's love is quiet, private, and obedient. He works behind the scenes, protecting and providing without fanfare or recognition.

The question isn't which one is better; both are necessary and holy. The real question is: which one is harder for you, and which one is needed in your specific context right now?

The Challenge of Loving Like Mary

Speaking up requires courage, especially when our truth challenges power structures or disrupts comfortable narratives. It risks ridicule, rejection, or retaliation. It makes us visible and vulnerable. For many of us, especially those who've been told to be quiet, to stay in our lane, to not make waves, loving like Mary feels terrifying.

Yet there are moments when love demands that we speak, that we prophesy, that we disturb the peace that's built on injustice. There are times when silence becomes complicity, and love requires us to raise our voices.

The Challenge of Loving Like Joseph

Quiet obedience can feel passive in a culture that values visibility and influence. It requires humility to work behind the scenes without recognition. It demands trust to obey God even when you don't understand the full picture. For many of us, especially those who crave validation or struggle with being overlooked, loving like Joseph feels like settling for less.

Yet there are moments when love demands that we listen, that we surrender our plans, that we create space for God's work without needing credit. There are times when the most powerful thing we can do is show up quietly and faithfully.

Group Discussion Question

Is it harder to love like Mary, out loud and prophetically, or like Joseph, with restraint and quiet obedience? Which expression of love is needed in your context right now? What would it cost you to love in that way, and what might it produce?

From Expectation to Incarnation



Hope: What Could Be?

We began Advent with hope, that audacious expectation that God's promises are trustworthy even when circumstances suggest otherwise. Hope is the fantasy that dares to believe in resurrection, restoration, and redemption.



Peace: What Holds Us Steady?

We moved to peace, that devoted stillness that anchors us when everything shakes. Peace is not the absence of trouble but the presence of God in the midst of it, the calm that surpasses understanding.



Joy: What We Celebrate Despite?

We celebrated joy, that defiant gladness that rises up regardless of circumstances. Joy is the party we throw in the face of pain, the song we sing when sorrow surrounds us, the dance that refuses to stop.



Love: What Arrives and Disrupts Everything

Now we encounter love, not as a feeling but as a person. Love arrives in flesh, disrupts our plans, reorders our priorities, and transforms everything. Love is Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

Notice the progression. We don't start with love; we start with hope. We don't jump straight to the manger; we journey through Advent. This matters because spiritual formation is a process, not an event. We need hope to sustain us through waiting. We need peace to anchor us in uncertainty. We need joy to celebrate even in difficulty. And then, when we've been shaped by this journey, we're ready to receive love in all its disruptive, transformative glory.

Christ becomes the throughline that connects all four elements. Jesus is our ultimate Hope, the fulfillment of every promise. Jesus is our true Peace, reconciling us to God and one another. Jesus is our deepest Joy, the gladness that death itself cannot diminish. And Jesus is Love incarnate, God's heart made visible and touchable in human flesh.

"The Way of the World" Reframed

"You will find peace of mind if you look way down in your heart and soul..."

Earth, Wind & Fire understood something that the church sometimes forgets: resilient love requires inner work. In a world designed to harden our hearts, we must intentionally cultivate tenderness. In a culture that commodifies and weaponizes love, we must protect and deepen our capacity for authentic connection.

The invitation to "look way down in your heart and soul" is not narcissistic navel-gazing; it's spiritual survival. It's the practice of going beneath the wounds, past the defenses, beyond the cynicism, to find that place where God's love still lives. It's the discipline of tending your inner life so that love doesn't become just another word you use but a reality you embody.

01

Acknowledge the Hardening

Don't deny the ways the world has wounded you or hardened your heart. Name the disappointments, betrayals, and losses honestly.

03

Tend Your Heart

Like a garden, your heart needs regular attention. Prayer, community, rest, beauty, and truth are the tools of heart-tending.

This is what the song teaches us about resilient love: it's not naive optimism that pretends the world isn't hard. It's grounded realism that acknowledges the hardness while choosing tenderness anyway. It's the practice of returning again and again to the source of love within, to the God who lives in our hearts and souls, who reminds us that we were made for love and that no amount of worldly hardship can erase that truth.

02

Go Deeper

Beneath the hurt, there's still gold. Beneath the scars, there's still softness. Practice looking past your defenses to find the love that remains.

04

Risk Again

Resilient love means choosing to stay open even after being hurt. It means loving again, trusting again, hoping again, despite everything.

Discussion Prompts

1. What does it mean for love to cost you something?

Love cost Mary her reputation, her sense of control, and eventually, her son. Love cost Joseph his plans, his understanding of righteousness, and his comfort. Real love always costs something. It requires vulnerability, sacrifice, and risk.

- What has love cost you in your life?
- What is love asking you to sacrifice right now?
- How do we distinguish between healthy sacrifice and harmful self-erasure?
- Where do you see examples of costly love in your community?

2. How do we honor BOTH Mary's shout and Joseph's silence?

The church often privileges one expression of love over the other. Some communities celebrate prophetic voices while dismissing quiet service as passivity. Other communities value humble obedience while silencing prophetic truth-telling as divisive.

- How does your faith community make space for both loud and quiet love?
- Who are the Marys in your church, the ones speaking prophetic truth?
- Who are the Josephs, the ones serving faithfully behind the scenes?
- How can we honor both without diminishing either?

3. What does "spirit" mean in your current walk of faith?

Spirit is more than religious language or denominational doctrine. Spirit is the living, breathing presence of God that animates everything we do. Spirit is what makes faith more than belief, what transforms religion from rules into relationship.

- How do you experience the Holy Spirit in your daily life?
- What practices help you stay attuned to the Spirit's movement?
- Where do you see evidence of the Spirit at work in your community?
- How does Spirit connect hope, peace, joy, and love in your experience?

Take your time with these questions. Don't rush to answers. Sit with the discomfort of not knowing. Listen to each other's stories. Make space for disagreement and discovery. This is holy work, this practice of thinking together about what love requires and how we embody it.

The Christ Beyond Love

Here's where we need to pause and go deeper. Advent doesn't simply end in love, as if love were the final destination. Love brings us to something, someone, greater: **Christ himself**. Jesus is not just the reason for the season, a phrase we throw around casually. Christ is the reordering of the world, the disruption of every system built on power, greed, and violence.

Think about what the Incarnation actually means. God didn't send a message, didn't establish new rules, didn't give us a better philosophy. God became human. The Creator entered creation. The Infinite became finite. The Eternal stepped into time. This is scandalous, shocking, revolutionary.

When the Word became flesh, everything changed. The powerful were put on notice that their reign was ending. The marginalized were told that they were seen, valued, beloved. The systems of this world were confronted with an alternative kingdom where the last are first, the poor are blessed, and love wins.

Christ as Reason

Yes, Jesus is the reason we celebrate, the purpose behind the season. His birth, life, death, and resurrection give us hope, peace, joy, and love. He is the answer to humanity's deepest questions and the fulfillment of God's oldest promises.

This is the Christ we encounter at the end of Advent: not a baby in a manger to sentimentalize, but the King of kings who came to overturn tables, challenge empires, and establish a kingdom that will never end. This is the Christ who makes all things new, who takes our broken world and recreates it according to the logic of divine love.

So as we conclude this series, we're not just celebrating love. We're celebrating the One who is love, who embodies love, who showed us what love looks like when it gets dangerous and disruptive. We're encountering Christ, the culmination of everything Advent promises: hope fulfilled, peace established, joy unleashed, and love made flesh.

Christ as Reordering

But Jesus is more than reason; he is reordering. His kingdom disrupts every earthly kingdom. His love confronts every loveless system. His presence challenges every absence of justice. He doesn't just explain the world; he transforms it.

Final Reflection

What does it mean for Christ to be not just the reason for the season, but the reordering of the world? How does this bigger vision of Jesus change how you live, love, and work for justice?

Closing Blessing

"That's the way of the world, but God broke into the world with love, and everything changed."

We've journeyed together through four weeks of Advent, exploring hope, peace, joy, and love through the music of Earth, Wind & Fire and the witness of Scripture. We've encountered Mary's prophetic praise and Joseph's quiet obedience. We've wrestled with the tension between the world's hardening and God's tenderness. We've discovered that love is not just an emotion but a person, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us.

Now we carry this forward. We carry the hope that refuses to give up, the peace that anchors us in storms, the joy that celebrates despite circumstances, and the love that transforms everything it touches. We carry these not as individual virtues but as the integrated life of the Spirit, the fullness of what it means to follow Christ.

We carry Hope

Believing that God's promises are trustworthy, that resurrection is real, that the future belongs to love

We carry Peace

Anchored in God's presence, steady in uncertainty, calm in the midst of chaos

We carry Joy

Celebrating despite difficulty, dancing in defiance of despair, singing songs of gladness

We carry Love

Embodied, costly, disruptive love that looks like Jesus, walks like Jesus, and transforms the world like Jesus

Closing Prayer

God of hope, peace, joy, and love, we thank you for this Advent journey. We thank you for Mary's courage and Joseph's faithfulness. We thank you for the music that moves us and the Scriptures that guide us. We thank you for Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, who shows us what love looks like in flesh and blood.

Now send us out as spirit-filled witnesses. May we carry hope to the hopeless, peace to the troubled, joy to the sorrowful, and love to the unloved. May we be the body of Christ in this world, making your love tangible and real.

Help us shout like Mary when prophetic voice is needed. Help us listen like Joseph when quiet obedience is required. Help us embody love in all its forms, loud and quiet, public and private, disruptive and devoted.

That's the way of the world, Lord, but you broke into the world with love, and everything changed. May we be agents of that change, carriers of that love, witnesses to that transformation. In the name of Jesus, our Hope, our Peace, our Joy, our Love, we pray. Amen.

Go in peace. Go in power. Go in the spirit of Earth, Wind & Fire: grounded in hope, moved by peace, burning with joy, and animated by love. Emmanuel is with us.