

First Scripture Lesson:

Isaiah 42:1-9

Our first Scripture lesson this morning comes from the prophet Isaiah. This is a prophecy about a servant who is to come. We see here in Isaiah 42 something that Dr. Cory Driver calls “God’s emotional self-revelation,” meaning we see a glimpse of God’s nature and character. God is the Creator of all that is, the only one who holds a divine name. God delights at the thought of this chosen servant.

The servant who is coming will take God’s justice outside of the bounds of Israel, to all people. That theme of justice is repeated several times - listen out for it. Justice to the nations, faithfully bringing forth justice, not resting until justice has been brought to the whole earth.

When we read this Scripture passage during Advent, the obvious connection to make is that Jesus is the chosen servant, the one who will bring justice to the nations, who will shine forth as a light for all people. And that’s true - we, of course, believe that. The thing about prophecies from the Ancient Near East, however, is that they were kept around because *they had already come true*. Prophecies in the Hebrew Bible are not like psychic predictions today. Many of those alive in the century or two after this prophecy was written will have ascribed it to the great and benevolent King Hezekiah, who did, in fact, rule with justice, in righteousness and truth, following the ways of the Lord. And when it was fulfilled by King Hezekiah, it was kept around, because *it could come to pass again*. And it did, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God with us, Savior of the nations, light of the world.

And - it could still come true, again. In fact, it’s supposed to, with Christ’s people shining light in the world, bringing justice to the nations, living into the incarnation each and every day, that all might know peace.

Listen now for God’s word to the prophet Isaiah - and to us, today.

42

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: ⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. ⁹See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

The word of the Lord.

Our second Scripture lesson this morning comes from the gospel of Matthew. This passage picks up right after the genealogy of Jesus that was featured in the Presbyterian Women’s Horizons Bible study last year. The opening verse of the book of Matthew may be the title of the Gospel itself: the book of the origins of Jesus Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham.

This is the part of the Christmas story where we start to get into the weeds around Jesus's paternity in a way that would be considered exceptionally rude by modern standards. Technically, he has no earthly father, as his was an immaculate conception. However, as the writer of Matthew points out here, his connection to the fathers of the faith - and thus fulfillment of prophecy - comes not from Mary, his only biological parent, but from Joseph, his earthly, adoptive father, with whom he shares no DNA.

As we'll read together in just a few moments, like Mary, Joseph was visited by an angel in a dream to explain the uncomfortable details about Mary's pregnancy. Namely, that Mary has not been with anyone else, and the child growing in her womb is none other than the promised Messiah. Joseph and Mary have been chosen to bring him into the world, to raise him in the ways of righteousness and truth, and take responsibility for his well-being until he's able to do so, himself.

Joseph acts in alignment with the incarnate, embodied love that his own son is bringing into the world. It's no wonder he was chosen, alongside Mary, for this daunting, delicate task.

Listen now for God's word from the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 1, verses 18-25.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

We're going to do a little participatory exercise.

What do you think of when you hear the word "love?"

Think about it for a moment, and then I want you to turn to your neighbor and tell them. I mean it. Please talk to your neighbor during the middle of this church service. Ready? Go.

Any brave souls want to shout out their answers?

Anybody up front? Choir? Pastors?

As we've seen in your answers, love is a multifaceted, simple-yet-complicated, fundamental-yet-sometimes-evasive phenomenon. It is a feeling, and maybe a state of being. It's also a commodity that sells books and movies and greeting cards. It is the subject of songs through the ages, from the sultry,

operatic heroine Carmen singing “Love is a rebellious bird,” to the Beatles singing “Love is all you need” to Percy Sledge crooning “When a Man Loves a Woman,” to Taylor Swift’s “Sweet Nothing.”

Love opens us to a world of good and beautiful feelings and experiences, but it also has the potential to open us to a world of heartache and pain, vulnerable and alone. There are perhaps an equal number of songs about that. It’s why Tina Turner sings, “What’s Love Got to Do With it? What’s love but a second hand emotion? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?”

It’s a good question. And love certainly isn’t only romantic. We love our families, our friends, we feel compassion born out of love for those in need, for those whose names we don’t know but whose stories tug at our heartstrings.

This morning’s Gospel Lesson is a story about love. It’s a story of an honest and righteous man who lovingly cares for his fiancé no matter the potential for stigma and shame surrounding her condition. It is the story of an adoptive father who loves and cares for and cherishes his wife’s son. It is the story of a man of faith who loves God enough to venture into the unknown, to believe the unbelievable, and to do his part in ushering in God’s new kingdom of love through the Incarnation.

This morning’s reading in the church-wide Advent Devotional also tells a love story. Quinn Caldwell tells us the legend of Mary’s parents, Joachim and Anne (who will later become St. Anne, namesake to the neighborhood St. Anne’s Hill, among many other things). Joachim and Anne were said to be very much in love, but not able to have children until, as the story often goes in stories from the Ancient Near East, they are blessed with a child late in life. As tradition has it, Anne was very involved in the life of the child Jesus as his maternal grandmother, and she is the patron saint of mothers, wives, grandparents, and those who cannot have children.

I am sure that Tina Turner means very well when she sings about her heartbreak, and questions love’s place in the world. But the thing about love is that it almost guarantees that, at some point, we will know pain borne from that love. It may be grief, or anger, or betrayal, but at some point, those we love will leave us, or disappoint us, or let us down.

This is the thing about the Incarnation, especially as we know the whole story. This is the tension we hold in the Advent season, knowing that Lent is just a few months away. Perfect love has come into the world and yet, there is still suffering, there is still pain. But Advent reminds us, year after year, that perfect love *has never left the world*, that God has not forsaken us to our suffering, that redemption is not only possible, it happens day after day, year after year.

The late professor, activist, and author bell hooks writes some about this phenomenon in her book “All About Love: New Visions.” While her writing is not specifically theological, the book addresses the very fact that while love is all around us in media, our society - and the individuals who comprise it - are so often completely and fully bereft of real, incarnate love. This absence of practiced, embodied love leaves us vulnerable to the many ills that plague us: violence, division, apathy, enmity. She urges the reader to think about - and then take action around - the ways that love (or a lack thereof) especially impact those with the fewest resources, who rely the most on others.

She writes, “Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.”

How might we let our hearts speak the language of love in this Christmas season, especially to the lonely, the vulnerable, the sick, and the downtrodden? How might we embody the incarnate love of Christ to our

families, our friends, our workplaces, and the wider community? How might we really seek to serve Christ faithfully, because perfect love has come and is still here? How might we really let others know?

Joseph speaks with his heart when he remains with Mary and raises Jesus as his own. As bell hooks also says, "The search for love continues even in the face of great odds."

We face great odds, today, in letting love speak. But we do it, anyway, because it continues even in the face of hardship and struggle. Times are tough and not looking to get better, but you all still found a way to provide Christmas gifts to 148 children from our school partnerships through our Gifts From the Heart program. This is love incarnate. Schedules are filling up, but the Deacons still hosted a beautiful luncheon for those grieving a loss in the last year. This is love incarnate. Families are increasingly overbooked, but they still managed to show up and overflow out of the fellowship hall with potluck dish in hand so that their children could bless us with their music at the Advent Christmas Dinner. This is love incarnate.

We will gather, six days from now, some of us at 4:00pm and some us at 10, to tell the story of the wonder and miracle and mystery of love made manifest in our world. We will ring bells and sing songs and light candles and celebrate that perfect love has come into the world and never left. I hope you'll join us.

Yes, Tina Turner gets it wrong when she sings, "Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" That's the whole point. Our hearts will be broken, but they will be made whole again, too. For love has come, and it never left. It is love that has come down and washes over us in the waters of baptism. It is love that binds us together, that calls all of us - new members and old - to this covenant community of grace. It is love - incarnate love - that compels us to serve the least of these through our ID Ministry. It is love that bridges the hopes and fears of all our years, love that sends us all into jubilee alongside those shepherds so many years ago. It is love that transforms, love that liberates, love that comforts, love that heals. What's love got to do with it? Everything. It's everything. Perhaps one day scientists will discover that love itself is the very fabric of the universe, more fundamental than atoms themselves.

May we go forth into the world today - into the depths of winter cold and darkness - and be light for the world. May we embody the love that Christ brought, that Mary his mother nurtured and Joseph his father carried, and Anne his grandmother cherished. May we, like those mothers and fathers of our faith, take great risks in the name of love, especially for those who need it most. May all who know us know that we are people formed and forged in a new covenant of love, and may it be so for the life of the church. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.