THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT—*LOVE*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

Jeannie D. Thompson

December 17, 2023

*God In Love* Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Advent—otherwise known as “the holiday” or “Christmas season”—these days, is usually dominated by the pageantry of parties and family homecomings, visits and gatherings. Among the musical and artistic, plans and excursions are foremost as we anticipate this year’s offering of choirs singing Christmas Carols, or the ballet and *The Nutcracker’s Suite,* and Handel’s *Messiah.* (My own favorite is Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* which only gets trotted out once in a blue moon.)

Here at church, we busy ourselves with finding the tree and the ornaments, and remembering where we left the manger (for the Christmas play) last year. If anyone is wondering, it is in the hallway outside of my door and has been there the entire year. So, our minds are mostly on the baby Jesus and what it means that God chose to come to live among us as one of us. We are so used to hearing about Baby Jesus that sometimes I wonder if we forget what a wild and amazing statement that is—*God* as a small, helpless infant. God, who needed all of the care and attention that every baby needs if it is going to survive.

In a world, and among beings such as ourselves, the only thing that is more valued than riches is power—usually “power over” others. The conflicts that surround us in the world are raw, tragic displays of the all-too-human pursuit of “power over” another. We engage one another with angry words and arguments, and then progress—all too quickly—to armed combat, and weapons of mass destruction.

This is the world God entered as an infant—and a poor infant, at that! Born to a woman and man without position or wealth, God took a great chance at even surviving infancy. I “googled” infant mortality during Jesus’ time. Apparently babies had only a 50% chance of survival when Jesus was born. Women, whose life span averaged 30 years, typically bore six infants during their lifetime. Sadly, only about two lived to maturity.

How is such activity possible—this bringing of children into the world? Jesus’ world was, by our standards, primitive and lacking in many of the comforts and protections we take for granted. How did women and men face such a world and bring children into it?

Of course, we can also ask the same thing of ourselves. In a world such as ours that continues to lurch and stumble from one armed conflict to another; from one more expression of hatred and pain to another, how do we find the hope to keep having children?

Well, we do so, of course, because we can have deep feelings for one another; feelings that cause us to be brave and hopeful. And so we build families together. We love.

The person who wrote Isaiah suggests that God also loves. In fact, Isaiah tells us that God has shown God’s love by drawing him close and anointing him. God, who usually anoints princes and kings, anoints the one speaking in this passage.

Without a royal person in sight, God places a mark of distinction on the head of the speaker. From that point on, Isaiah, and all who listen to his words are people who also receive God’s anointing. That is, we are now unified with God in such a way that we allow God’s Spirit to direct our lives. Indeed, to be anointed by God, to let the Spirit directs us, is to speak and to act at God’s direction.

One scholar described the passage as “a mission statement for the reign of God,” and it certainly does read that way. However, rather than a directive or a command, I want to suggest that to be anointed by God is to be *joined into* God—into God’s life, God’s being. The other night, at Bible Study, I went on (at some length) about such joining as being, not so much a mission, as it is a *response* to God and God’s love.

That is: when we are anointed, we are drawn into a loving relationship with God—a relationship very much like the relationships we have with each other. We can love God in all sorts of ways that show our love; ways that bring joy and gladness to the heart of God.

In this passage, God tells us how, and how much, God longs to bring that same kind of gladness to our hearts. Every instance of deficiency, hunger, and justice is going to be met with God’s deep desire for wholeness and plenty. In fact, one of the statements that should immediately jump out at us is in verse eight when Isaiah tells us that his anointing (and ours) has given him the power, *and* the desire to:

*to build up the broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
   and release to the prisoners;   
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor…*

Later, he will talk about how this ministry to them will enable them to respond to the devastation all around them with hope. It will enable them to build up their lives and the lives of others. It will allow them to build a new city—a new Jerusalem—that will shelter people with righteousness, with love.

Finally, God says very directly to them (in verse 8):

*I the Lord love justice,  
   I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
   and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.*

This is the way God is when God is in love, and God is in love with us. And what this passage says is that amazing things can happen when we find it in ourselves to also love God back. We are capable of amazing acts that make love and justice happen even in our midst.

One of the ways we know this is because the Gospel of Luke tells us that this is the very passage that Jesus chose to read from as he began his public ministry. Specifically, he read the words,

*18‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
   because he has anointed me  
     to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
   and recovery of sight to the blind,  
     to let the oppressed go free,   
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’   
20And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’*

God’s love of humankind, though Jesus, was expressed through his human life as God’s love of justice. God’s love took on a new, very personal characteristic that lifted it beyond submission to a set of rules or Laws. Instead, God’s love became embodied in Jesus whose life was an unbroken chain of loving acts. That is: the sick were healed, the hungry were fed, even the dead were resuscitated. Whenever Jesus went life and goodness followed—love was made real and tangible.

The love of God was made whole and good through the birth of Jesus. It was made whole and good through the actions of his earthly parents for him, too: through Mary’s breast-feeding him, and Joseph’s support and protection. Together, they were a family. There is a line in a Christmas song that says, “Mary worshiped him with a (mother’s) kiss.” Mary and Joseph both responded to the child with love.

Today, you and I are also anointed with the love of God. We know and accept this when we are baptized. However, we also know that God’s anointing and love is still in the world because, despite everything, we can still see evidence of this all around us.

We can still find people who were as much in love with God as a man like Martin Luther King, Jr. was. King loved God and this caused him to love his own life and his own people with courage and loving actions. One of his spiritual descendants is a man known as the Rev. Dr. William Barber who formed what is known as the “poor people’s movement” to address poverty in this country in a public way—demonstrations of laws that bring more suffering to the poorest and most vulnerable in our communities, and education for all us about what we can do, and how we can get the information we need to address hunger, homelessness, deficiency in education and schools, etc.

Recently, Rev. Barber, as he wrote some thoughts on the war in Gaza and Israel, began his remarks with this quote: ***You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD*. — Lev. 19:18**

**Speaking from the position of a Christian who also engages in interfaith dialogue, Rev. Barber went on to write this:**

*as we witness gross distortions of faith by Christian nationalists in public life, we also celebrate how people from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions around the world are coming together to cry for peace. Some say cease-fire, some say a “cessation of hostilities,” some say humanitarian pause. Some just say, “Stop for the babies!” But the world is experiencing a kind of Pentecost as people cry out in different tongues with a unified call to end the violence…*[because] *our traditions share a commitment to justice, especially for those who are weak and vulnerable in this world. Whenever there is an imbalance of power, God hears the cries of those who are suffering and calls us to join their cry for justice.*

The Rev. Barber operates on a national and international stage, so his words will have far-reaching impact. However, he is not the only one who can stand up in our midst and speak words of God’s love. Because we can all feel and experience the love of God in our lives, we can also express the love we have for God by speaking up for one another.

In fact, this past week, when antisemitism raised its ugly head here on our island, one of the members of our church emailed and asked me if I would make some kind of a statement. (I had not heard about the incidents until then.) The member asked if perhaps I could do this with some of the folks from the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service we work with every year.

Through some fast emailing back and forth, ten of us were able to send a letter to the editor of the Star-Advertiser on Friday morning. Hopefully, it will be published in the next few days.

Long ago, Isaiah was moved by the love of God to speak God’s words so that all others would also know that God loves them. Jesus, for whom we wait and celebrate is the embodiment of that love which, as Scripture tells us, is “great news for all people.”

Jesus, Isaiah, Dr. King, Dr. Barber and me, and you, and many, many others. We have been anointed. We have been blessed and brought close to the heart of God and each other so that we may be loved by God. That is our good news: that God not only loves us, but that God is *in* love with us and will do everything possible to show us this love.

What is asked of us is that we love God in return—that we love God in much the same way we love one another which is by finding more and more ways to please and delight our beloved. Anointed by God’s Spirit, in the words of one writer: “We walk with Jesus through the wonder of life with the Spirit. We discover the fulness of our humanity and the depth of our purpose as we accept the mission of the One whose truth and justice spring forth in gladness and joy. God takes our stories and dreams, and molds them into an adventure of justice and comfort and good news for all. These words form and inform the trajectory of Christ’s identity and ministry. Two thousand years later, they form ours as well.”

So I pray these words of Isaiah and others bring us closer to the our God who is in love with us all. Amen.