

Testify to Divine Love

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

³ Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
'Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.'

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;

⁷ the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

⁸ A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God's people;
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.

⁹ No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. ⁹Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-6

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'⁴ Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

One thing I try to remember to say, or have John say as he gives the announcements, is how we hope and pray that you would indeed feel God's presence here and now, in this church. Of course that doesn't mean that I hope that you feel God's *absence* if you go to any other church, and doesn't mean that I don't want you to feel God's presence in every aspect of your life, in every moment of your existence; of course I want you to live in constant awareness of God's presence with you in every aspect of your life, in good times and in bad, when you're celebrating as well as when you are suffering. The truth is that many people, including Christians, simply DON'T feel God's presence *even* in church, and I believe that's not simply because those people are creating barriers between themselves and God; it's also because the Church has been complicit in putting boundaries between humanity and God where there are none, at least none that God has constructed. Indeed it's the Gospel message that God has removed any such barriers and sent Jesus into this world in part to make that truth very clear to us. Jesus' life and death and resurrection are all about restoring God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Now you may say, "Yes pastor, but Jesus is no longer here; he ascended into heaven, and no one has seen him since, although I've heard something to the effect that he's sitting in a seat just to the right of the Father and biding his time until he comes again to judge the living and the dead. And since he and the father are one those seats must be very close together, and the Father, too, must be sitting there biding his time, waiting to come and fix all the messes that we've gotten ourselves into." And so how can we feel God's presence if two-thirds of the Trinity is somewhere else, and the third person is a Holy Ghost, and everyone knows that ghosts are rather hard to see. These, I dare say, are the sorts of barriers that the Church has created, though I doubt they were intentional. The whole point of Jesus' coming was that he initiated the coming of the Kingdom of God right here and now, not just two thousand years ago, but from that time *forward*, even to this day. Immanuel means "God with us."

We shouldn't feel too badly if we have missed this point; two thousand years ago there were plenty of people who didn't think of Jesus as anyone special. We may think that if he were standing in front of us right now, preaching or teaching or performing miracles or resurrecting we'd have no problem believe that God is right here in our midst, but consider our Gospel lesson. John the Baptist has been preaching the coming of the Kingdom of God, and the coming of the Messiah, God's chosen, a king who would inaugurate God's rule on earth. John told people to repent, to change their evil ways lest they get burned like chaff. In walks Jesus, who is eating and drinking with all sinners and tax collectors, all the wrong people, and if anyone was likely to recognize the true messiah when they saw him it would have been John's disciples, right? Or John for that matter. But they're confused by this strange behavior from the one who is supposedly the messiah. What's he doing eating with those folks? Shouldn't he be staying clean and cleansing all of Israel from such riff raff? And so John's disciples come and ask Jesus, "Are you the right guy, or are we looking for someone else?" My point is that even in Jesus' day, it was hard to notice God's very presence when it sat right under our noses, and all our modern wisdom and intelligence has not made it any easier for us to notice it either.

Because it's so hard for us to get our heads around DIVINE LOVE, a love that is as big as God himself. Last week we spoke of transforming love, and I made the point that transformation in ourselves and in our world is something that *we must will*; it's something we must actively pursue. But Divine Love is something that God wills, and humanity cannot thwart it let alone comprehend it. Divine love encompasses *all of creation*. Because divine love is what prompted creation to begin with and made this wonderful world that we live in. God could have created something much different, a world where there was no life at all, or where we were all robots who simply follow any orders we're programmed to perform. But divine love doesn't do that; divine love creates us

to love and enjoy fellowship with God and each other and to celebrate creation. “And God looked upon all that he had created, and behold it was *very good!*” Why have we diminished God’s love by thinking that all we can hope for is that our spirits will go to some place to heaven when we die? Has God stopped caring about this world? Is God incapable of recreating and transforming it? No, DIVINE LOVE is big enough to transform our own world and our human bodies into something better, into something perfect, and our failure to appreciate this may be the result of our limits with regard to hope – the new heaven and the new earth is more than **God** can handle, so instead he’s got this wonderful little spiritual realm where our souls can hang out and play pinochle for eternity. Jesus meant more than that. He came to achieve more than that.

Jesus came to do what we couldn’t do; that’s what divine love is about. The world was created perfectly through divine love, and we messed it up. Human history has shown that we can’t restore a perfect world by our own means; we’ve gone through phases like the renaissance or the enlightenment where we *thought* we were close to regaining that perfect state, where we dreamed that education and art and science and culture could fix all the problems in the world, but a few world wars and genocides and terrorist attacks later and we’ve come to realize that fixing the world may be more than humanity can handle on its own. **AND HERE IS WHERE WE NEED TO HEAR AGAIN THE MESSAGE OF ADVENT; GOD HAS A PLAN, AND THAT PLAN IS ALREADY BEING PLAYED OUT!** That same divine love that created this world perfectly is re-creating it as we speak, it will come to fruition, not through our efforts but through God’s efforts, not by *our* capacity to love, but *by God’s divine love*. We need not despair about all the evil in this world because Jesus broke the power of evil on the cross, and evil is on the run and evil will be finally vanquished when Jesus returns in glory.

Now if you consider yourself to be somewhat detached from God then what I’m saying sounds rather pathetic to you, because you cannot fathom the kind of change that is necessary to make this world perfect in every way. Even many Christians have given up on such an idea and think of Jesus as more like a lifeboat captain who’s going to rescue them from this wicked world and carry them off to heaven. But such a theology belittles God and belittles divine love which not only affirms creation but assures the defeat of sin and evil in this world.

That’s why we celebrate Christmas. Jesus came into a world that was, and still is, in despair. He came as a Jew, as someone from a culture and a belief that God was there with his people and wished to remain with his people forever. And when armies and empires conquered their nation and enslaved them, they kept up their hope that God had not forsaken them, that someday a messiah would come who would defeat Israel’s enemies and establish God’s kingdom once and for all. Jesus knew himself to be this person, but he came in a way that surprised his people as it still surprises many of us. He didn’t just come to drive out the latest emperor, the latest dictator; he came to drive out the evil that leads to empires and dictatorships in the first place. He came to show the world the face of God, not a fearsome, awesome warrior God who would squash armies under his feet, but a peaceful, patient, forgiving God who conquers our heart with his love. Jesus shows us a God who confronts the powers of this world and declares, “You *have* no power, at least none that matters.” Jesus stood before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who knew that he had the power of life and death over Jesus in his hands, and Jesus tells him, “You have nothing in your hands. The only power you have is that power that God has given you.” And you have to imagine how taken back Pilate must have been. And those of us who claim Christ as our Lord know exactly what Jesus meant; the way of violence and oppression, of threat and domination, the threat of torture and death, that’s not power; *that’s weakness*. True power, the power of God, is best displayed on Calvary, in Jesus on the cross. That’s the love of God is on display, where God’s forgiveness emanates, and all the evil in the world cannot defeat the power of that love. That is divine love.

We shouldn’t look at the cross as merely a gateway for us to get to heaven but as God planting himself once again among us, and remaining with us in body, even after death. We should look upon the cross as the beginning of Christ’s rule here on earth, as the restoration of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, a kingdom defined by joy and love and peace and celebration...and LIFE. Advent is about the divine love that created this world and is also working to restore this world. It’s happening around us. It’s happening in us. May we testify to that divine love as we celebrate this and every Advent season.