

Advent Week 2: I Believe in Love: Daring Right Relationships
Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11
Rev. Shannon White
Wilton Presbyterian Church
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Our choir opened our worship today with the words:

I believe in love...

I believe in love...

even when, even when I don't feel it

These words comprise the second verse to the poem

I believe in the sun...

even when, even when I don't see it...

which we heard last week. Those words were found scrolled on a prison camp wall during the Holocaust. That first refrain was sung for the week we focused on HOPE... this week, it's LOVE. Love. Not romantic love... but love which is enacted through daring right relationships...

We have a tendency, in our individualistic western society, to look at texts, such as our reading for this morning, and to read them as if they were written to us individually... for individual relationships. While that may be true for some texts, Isaiah's text is written to communities of faithful people, not to individuals. And so, in our reading, let us receive it as if our broader community was being addressed.

Here's a bit of a deeper dive into our text this week to give us context.

In this text, which is from 3rd Isaiah (you'll remember that Isaiah is thought to have been from three sources, or traditions over time), Rev. Susan DeGeorge recently reminded us: At this point in history, the children of Israel have now returned to Israel from their exile in Babylonian captivity of 60 years. The temple, which had been destroyed,

was now being rebuilt. And the children of Israel were expecting to return to what was normal for them—life as they had known it before they left. But, while they had been gone, things had changed. And now, things didn't look the way they had dreamed they would. Other people who had moved in, foreigners, had intermarried with those who had remained and there was now conflict over just what it meant to be Jewish? What faith traditions and beliefs were considered legitimate? And there were conflicts. Perhaps it was fear which set in the community—fear over losing what they had or not getting what they wanted. All very human—and at the bases of most of human conflict throughout history. Fear.

Into that context, Isaiah lays out an incredible vision of love—love as a basis of treating people through right relationship... a vision laid out in the beautiful and poetic words: bringing good news to the oppressed; binding up the brokenhearted; proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. In Isaiah's words, those who had lost everything... not just those coming back from exile, would be restored. Relationships between foreigners and those who had been long-standing members of the community would be reconciled. That would require some change from their current behavior.

In a sense, they were told, their beliefs needed to match their actions. For example, how could you fast, and still oppress people? Isaiah was bringing in a new vision... based on loving through right relationship.

So, how do we, as a church community, see this as a message to us as a whole, if we are to fully understand what message God has for us on this day?

In a sense, we are in a sort of exile right now. We cannot gather in our worship space. We are separated from one another out of necessity

because of this deadly pandemic called COVID... and that is so painful. It's even devastating for many who live in isolation.

But, as I have said before, this time offers us a strange sort of gift~~the time to reflect on our lives individually and as a community, to let go of what has held us back and guided by hope and faith in God, to change.

But that can be difficult if we're stuck in the inertia of fear. I don't know about you... but I have more recently found myself not wanting to look and hear about the rising numbers infection rates in our country. I want semi-tune out when I see front line workers being interviewed on television, donned in garb which makes them look alien-like... because I tell myself it is more than I can handle if I am to do my job of showing up to pastor our scattered flock. Their desperation and the pain of the reality they see up close and personal is too much. The truth is: They don't have that luxury... and it makes me queasy to even admit that.

But what I really think... is that what I'm really trying to deny in keeping the pain pushed away, is a deep and utter sense of fear... fear of loss: a loss of health; a loss of connection—the fear of being alone; a loss of loved ones; a loss of livelihood; a loss of autonomy; a loss of dreams; a loss of norms---the way things are and have always been;

But there's also a fear of what's ahead. A strange kind of fear over change and growth... it's a different kind of fear, a fear that's a bit energizing, but nevertheless, I still get stuck in it.

I imagine that I am not alone~~based on what I see and hear from people, both locally, regionally and nationally. And individual fear compounded is where we find a communal sense of fear~~which can result in the oppression of other groups of people.

It's into THAT fear... that whole messy, convoluted, stinky, very human pile, that the God of love comes... and sits and abides. Providing a love

that sorts out our communal fears which are fueled by individual fears but which offer us the opportunity, if faced, to be transformed ~~ restoring people and peoples to right relationship to one another **through a deep sense of compassion.**

As a community, we don't know what it will look like when we return. Some of our long-standing members have moved away from our area. That's painful. Like most other houses of worship and businesses in this economy, our budget has taken a hit this year... and we don't know what our ministry in 2021 will bring as many families struggle with real financial concerns.

And, at the same time, hundreds of families have moved to town since March. That's wonderful. Just before Thanksgiving, we sent out 400 packets welcoming newcomers to town... and offering a hand of hospitality. If you are one of those families... welcome.

But, just like every other worshipping community is realizing, our life together as a community is changing. This virus has just given us a chance to see up close a trend which was already taking place. We have had to pivot to an online community, which will continue even as we begin to gather once again in person.

WPC has a core identity of serving God through putting our faith into action, but how do we do that when we are in isolation?

How can we move forward and continue to live fully into God's vision for us as a thriving, faithful community?

God is saying through Isaiah's loving vision... start moving along the path and I'll help you.

That reminds me of a quote by Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, which a colleague and mentor introduced me to:

“Traveller, there is no road, the road is made by walking.”

(From Campos de Castillo by Spanish poet: Antonio Machado)

Hope and love have been our words for these first two weeks of Advent, and they will be guideposts for us through these days as we confront our fears and believe that the promise of Emmanuel, God-with-us—is as real and relevant now as it was long ago.

May it be so! Alleluia! Amen~