

“Revelations of Love”

Isaiah 35:1-10

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On this third Sunday in the season of Advent, we consider Revelations of Love. As a pastor, I think about love a lot—both the Divine Love that we call God, and the acts of loving ourselves and our neighbors that are supposed to be the hallmark of followers of the Way of Jesus. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” right? Right?

In this church, I know we think about love a lot—especially during this holiday season, when generosity is front and center, generosity being a common way to show love. I know in this church we practice loving each other in many different kinds of ways—from the cookie bake that Darla and Carole hosted recently to the worship leadership that so many of you have provided this year to the outreach events to benefit our houseless neighbors to the cards and letters and calls we share with each other, letting each other know that we see and care for each other. As I read through Isaiah 35 with the lens of today’s theme of Revelations of Love, I found myself wondering what kinds of love we see in this passage. Of course, there are many ways to love—are you familiar with the Love Languages? Love languages are the common ways that people give and receive love, as explored in the 1992 book by Gary Chapman. Depending on who you ask, there are five to seven love languages: words of affirmation, acts of service, physical connection, receiving gifts, quality time; other kinds of love languages are: sharing an activity, providing financial resources, and others. Many people discover the theory of love languages through therapy and counseling, and it is an interesting tool to use as individuals as well as to understand more about our relationships.

These are the lengths that humans have gone to to understand love: developing theories, writing countless books, creating business ventures and workshops and retreats. People study love for years and years, romantic and otherwise...and still it remains a mystery.

But if there’s something we know about the Holy One, it’s that They abide in mystery. And where the Holy One abides, there we will find revelation. Remember our definition of revelation: we’re not talking about the book of Revelation that comes at the end of the Christian Testament. Revelation is an unveiling, a revealing of something hidden or shrouded in mystery, a knowing of something previously unknown.

Revelations of love from the Holy One come to us all the time, primarily through our lived experiences and relationships with other people. In a handwritten card when we are going through a hard time. In a cup of coffee brought to you when you’re hard at work. In a meal prepared with care and shared. In a knowing glance that lets you know you’re truly being seen. In the precious moments of holding a new baby, and in the sacred stillness of our loved ones’ last breaths. In the hand-clasps of lovers, the hugs of friends, the pat on the shoulder from someone

you admire. Revelations of love through gifts and words and thoughtfulness and touch and time spent together.

But love is not—maybe NEVER—easy. One of my favorite quotes about love comes from the Priest in the show *Fleabag*, played by Andrew Scott and written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge:

“Love is awful. It’s awful. It’s painful. It’s frightening. It makes you doubt yourself, judge yourself, distance yourself from the other people in your life. It makes you selfish. It makes you creepy, makes you obsessed with your hair, makes you cruel, makes you say and do things you never thought you would do. It’s all any of us want, and it’s hell when we get there. So no wonder it’s something we don’t want to do on our own. I was taught if we’re born with love then life is about choosing the right place to put it. People talk about that a lot, feeling right, when it feels right, it’s easy. But I’m not sure that’s true. It takes strength to know what’s right. And love isn’t something that weak people do. Being a romantic takes a hell of a lot of hope. I think what they mean is, when you find somebody that you love, it feels like hope.”

And in Isaiah 35, love is similarly complicated: it comes in the call “do not be afraid,” and in the strengthening of shaky knees and trembling hands caused by fear, grief, and pain. The “burning sand” becomes a “fresh pool of water,” available to quench the thirst of those in need of refreshment. A road to restoration shall appear in the barren land, a “way out of no way”, the elders might say. The highways and byways shall be safe for travel, with no threat of harm or violence upon them. These revelations of love could be characterized with the words “safety,” “sustenance,” “assurance,” “accompaniment,” “possibility,” and “opportunity.” I wonder what other words you would use to describe the kind of love described in this passage.

Our scripture passage for today begins,

“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 shouting.”

Throughout the 35th chapter of Isaiah, God’s love for God’s people is revealed in ecological imagery—streams of water flowing over parched earth, blossoming where life had been sparse and rare, lush reeds at the water’s edge where there had previously been dry grassland. This restoration is not only reserved for nature, but also for humans.

And here is where we, 21st century readers with a working knowledge of systemic oppression and –isms, must be careful. In the middle of chapter 35, the prophet talks about people with disabilities being changed so that they are able-bodied. You may have already had this thought in your mind and heart as we read the passage, but let’s say it out loud: people who have disabilities

are no less whole, or worthy, or precious than someone who is able-bodied. People who have disabilities have full capacity for dignity, integrity and a flourishing life.

In our Bible Study on Thursday, we talked a bit about this part of the passage, wondering if there might be a revelation of love in the prophet's ancient words, acknowledging that we would use very different language today. We posited that maybe the prophet was trying to say something about living a vibrant and full life, that in the ancient world that did not have adaptive devices and technologies as we do today, disability was troubling to many because it impeded a person from living fully. We named our gratitude that there are many technologies that have been developed that increase the quality of life for people with disabilities. We named that all of us are "temporarily able-bodied," and that as we go through life, everyone's body changes and our abilities change. Beloved church, I know that I, and we, have a lot to learn about ableism, and I welcome conversation and recommendations in this journey.

Revelations of love can also be known through confronting the systems of human-created inequity and oppression. In the scripture passage for today from Isaiah 35, the prophet talks about the "redeemed" and the "ransomed." While in today's context we may understand these words to be referencing only spiritual redemption or ransoming, the original readers of the prophet's words were thinking far more literally. When the prophet talked about a "highway in the desert" or a "road for the ransomed to return," that had real political dimensions, as the prophet longed for the return of the Hebrew people who had been stolen into exile. This language also evokes the Exodus story, as a road was created through the desert, and through the water, so that the enslaved people could escape their subjugation and live in freedom.

This kind of love is characterized by perseverance, like we saw this week as Brittney Griner was released following 10 months of tireless advocacy from her wife Cherelle. This kind of love is characterized by the collective action of the Black Lives Matter movement, seeking not only to change hearts and minds but to change systems that keep Black folks and People of Color away from privilege, property and power. This kind of love is characterized by the witness of Indigenous peoples who defend their ancestral lands from oil pipelines, who advocate for the rights of orcas, who risk the truth-telling about missing and murdered indigenous women and two-spirit people. These revelations of love call us all to be present with an Advent mindset—to stop, watch, pay attention...and to open ourselves to be moved by the Holy One in paths of justice.

14th century saint Julian of Norwich wrote the first English-language book by a woman, called *Revelations of Divine Love*. The famous quote "all shall be well" comes from this work. But throughout the book, she meditates on God's nature as Love. One quote in particular caught my attention, and I share it here with the original masculine language for God:

“Some of us believe that God is almighty, and *can* do everything; and that he is all wise, and *may* do everything; but that he is all love, and *will* do everything— there we draw back.”

When it comes to believing that God is Love, that’s where humans pause, Julian says. That’s where we are not ready to stake our claim. And, friends, if we’re honest, that kinda makes sense. We live in this world every day, going through our lives with each our own multiplicity of identities and intersecting privileges and oppressions...and loving people with different privileges and oppressions than us. We go through this life witnessing war around the globe, the devastation already wreaked by human-caused climate change, the violence of the carceral system in the USA and the detention of immigrants at our borders...seeing all of that, is God Love? Really? Do we believe that?

But here, dear ones, is where our Advent season has the potential to move us from despair to hope, from grief to joy, from apathy to love, if only we would let the Holy be revealed to us in this way.

Saint Teresa of Avila says it well:

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which He looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Beloved church, YOU are God’s revelation of Love to this world.
May it ever be so. Amen.