

Dreaming of Love
Isaiah 7:10–16; Matthew 1:18–23
Sunday, December 11, 2022 (Advent 3)

Let us pray: Coming Christ, as this season gets busier and busier, slow us down and help us to listen for the word that you are speaking into this world and into our lives, in Christ. Amen.

Throughout this season of Advent, we are looking at the visions of the prophet Isaiah, the ways that he dreamed of the hope and peace and love and joy that would be brought about by the Messiah. As we saw last week, Isaiah lived in a time and place of constant war and crisis, where there was *not* very much hope or peace or joy or love. Isaiah's world was not *that* different from our own. And so as *we* are anticipating the coming of Christ, we look back to the ways that *Isaiah* anticipated the coming of Christ, that *we* might also be able to dream of the hope and peace and joy and love that is so desperately needed in *our* world today; the ways that we *still* need Christ to come among us.

Now, normally, the Third Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of *joy*, and we talk about love next week. But next week, the Fourth Sunday of Advent, is always our Christmas cantata, and it always feels more appropriate to talk about joy on *that* Sunday, when we are rejoicing and singing out in praise to God. So we always talk about love on the third Sunday, because there's no hard and fast rule here; they're more like guidelines. If you want to hear the sermon on joy, come to the Longest Night service on Tuesday the 20th, where we will be talking about how to find joy in the midst of the darkness. But today we dream about love.

Yesterday we gathered here to celebrate the life of our friend and brother in Christ, Bob Spahr. The sanctuary was absolutely full. All of his children and grandchildren got up to speak about him. It was such a beautiful expression of the love that his family and friends felt for him.

There's a sense in which funerals are easy because we know what we are supposed to do. There are certain things that we do at a funeral – we gather here, we hug, we cry, we sing, we pray, we read scripture, we speak about the person we love (we might not always know what to *say*, but we know that we are supposed to speak), or we *listen* to people speak. There are just certain things that we do in order to celebrate this person's life and show our love for them. We know that these certain things are supposed to happen *there*.

Love is easier when we know *what* we're supposed to do and *how* to do it. It's a lot harder to love when we *don't* know what to do or how to do it.

Two weeks ago, just after we finished worship here on the first Sunday of Advent, I got a call that Bob had taken a turn, and that it probably wouldn't be much longer, so I went out to be with him and Julie and their family, to pray for him and bless him as he transitioned from this life to the life to come. So I got there and went through the service of blessing. But once that was done, there was nothing for us to *do*. It was just sitting and waiting. And that was hard. Because our culture tells us that we should always be *doing* something, we should always be *productive*, and if we're just sitting and waiting, we're not doing anything productive. We're just wasting time. But there was nothing we could *do* to speed the process along so that Bob could find the healing he needed. Any of you who have been through that before know, it is a very helpless time. You don't really know what to do or how to do it. There is nothing you *can* do but wait.

But *in* that waiting, as we sat there with him and held his hand and talked to him, *that* was where I experienced the presence of God. Not in a sanctuary filled with over 200 people (as amazing as that was), but in a small room where five people just sat together and waited.

When you love someone, you want to be with them. And sometimes *all* you can do is *be* with them.

In the midst of the uncertainty of the time and place in which Isaiah was living, he has a vision. “The young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel” (which in Hebrew means *God is with us*). Around 700 years later, that vision is realized in the birth of Jesus. But not *just* in the baby himself.

Joseph is engaged to Mary, but before they are married, she was found to be pregnant. Now, this can only mean one thing. They aren’t married yet. *Joseph* is not the one who got her pregnant. So that must mean that she has been unfaithful. At that time, according to Jewish law, adultery was punishable by death. Joseph would have been completely within his rights to have Mary killed. Even if he *doesn’t*, no one else is going to want to marry her anyway, because she’s already been unfaithful *once*. So she could live with her parents until *they* die, at which point she either hopes that this child can take care of her, or she will be out on the street begging (or worse) to make a living. Either way, her life is over.

Joseph, because he was a righteous man, didn’t want to make a big deal out of this. Didn’t want to have her killed. Didn’t want everybody to *know* what had happened, because that would have brought shame upon *him*. Everyone would know that *he* had been cheated on. So Joseph decides to just end the engagement and send her away quietly. Whatever happens to her, it’s not his problem anymore.

But then Joseph has a dream in which an angel of the Lord appears to him and says, “Do not be afraid to marry Mary, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus (the Hebrew word *Yeshua*, which means, ‘God saves’), for he will save his people from their sins.” We don’t get to the rest of the story today, because that has to wait until Christmas Eve, but we know what happens. Joseph wakes up and takes Mary as his wife. In the midst of great uncertainty, when he had no idea what to do, Joseph sticks with her, because that’s what love does. God is with them, not just in the child that is born, but in the way that they love one another. Like it says in the first letter of John that we read earlier, no one has ever *seen* God, but when we love one another the way God loves us, it’s like we see God in that other person. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

We have to remember here that love is not just a *feeling* or *emotion*, something that exists in our hearts or our heads. Love is not just something that we *have*, it is something that we *do*. Love is *shown* in how we *are* with one another. As Paul says, love is made manifest in the ways that we are patient and kind and hopeful with one another. Love is made manifest when we resist the urge to be envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, insisting on our own way, being irritable or resentful, resisting the urge to throw someone’s mistake back in their face. Love is made manifest in the ways that we bear with one another, believe one another (and believe *in* one another), hope for one another, and endure *together* whatever comes our way.

Joseph was patient and kind and hopeful. He chose to believe Mary, to believe *in* Mary, even though he had no proof other than a dream. He resisted the urge to insist on his own way and make her pay for what he thought was her sin. He chose to bear with her and to endure. He chose to *be with her*. And *that* is love.

God has chosen to be with *us*. And in the person of Jesus, we see a God who is patient and kind, who does not insist on his own way or make us pay for our sins and mistakes. We see a God who bears with us and endures, facing whatever comes our way *with us*. *That* is love.

When you love someone, you want to be with them. And sometimes *all* you can do is *be* with them. Very rarely do we have all the answers or know exactly what to do. We can't always fix this other person's pain or problems. In those times, all we can do is stick with each other, as Joseph stuck with Mary, and as God sticks with us. Sit with one another, even in silence. Hold each other's hand. Pray *with* each other and *for* each other. Just *be* together, so that whatever happens, at least we know we're not alone. Love is found in *presence* – God's presence with *us* and *our* presence with one another. When you don't know what to do, how to help this other person, how to fix this situation, all you have to do is be with them. *Being with* is an act of love.

Carol Holbrook Prickett says, "We are prone, in American culture, to think of love as something soft and gentle. But love is also powerful and strong and brave. Love is fierce. Love rushes in where there is pain or fear or suffering. And the fact that God comes to us not where God will be most worshipped and adored and pampered, but where we are most in need of saving – that tells me that God truly is love."

In this season of Advent, we are waiting for God to come to us where we are most in need of saving. In a culture that isn't very good at waiting, that tells us we can have whatever we want whenever we want it and that we should always be *doing*, waiting feels too much like doing nothing. But waiting is not doing nothing. Waiting is about learning how to be patient and discern what God is doing in this world and in your life. It is about looking and listening for God to show up.

Advent is a time when we practice patience. We don't just rush right into Christmas. We wait. As a kid, I had no idea what Advent was, but we would have presents sitting under the tree for *weeks* leading up to Christmas. I could not open them. I could only look at them and wait. But that taught me how to be patient. We have a gift waiting for us. And it's *coming*. But not yet. We have to be patient and keep watching and waiting.

Advent is a season that teaches us how to wait. And if we learn how to *wait*, how to just *be*, then we can learn how to *be* with each other. How to be patient and kind and hopeful. How to stick with each other, even in the darkest times. We can learn how to love each other the way that God loves us, in Christ. Amen.

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