

Message Manuscript for “How God Loves” Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11  
Delivered to Church for the Highlands  
Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2014

“How can you know you are really in love?” That was the question looming in the air while our typically verbose teacher was struggling to find some concrete words for such an abstract feeling. As he continued to think of how to respond, I thought about my own encounters with being in love; of getting to that point in a relationship when things are getting serious enough to exchange “I love you,” those words that are declared with some element of risk that they won’t be returned. Making such a declaration involves wading through your feelings and expectations, separating them from irrational emotions of attraction and fleeting infatuation. I heard it said once that being in love with someone is when you “know that you know.” That’s not really helpful, especially for guys. I don’t remember finding our teacher’s response about falling in love especially helpful either. It certainly wasn’t memorable. We all left class that day with the mystery of love unsolved. While it is difficult to describe definitively, we know love when we see it, right? If anything, it is found more in actions than in descriptions.

That’s certainly true when it comes to God’s love for us, isn’t it? While we often struggle with defining or describing our love for God, or even more so God’s love for us, we remember this time of year that God went beyond words to actions. God illustrated love for us in such a powerful way that we should never have to wonder how God feels about us. We do, however, wonder about it at times.

The people Isaiah addressed with the words we have read and heard here this morning wondered about it as well. They actually had some pretty good reasons for doing so—captivity, humiliation, physical and economic loss, injustice, and the pressures that go along with the rebuilding of their lives and nation. The God they once knew who had protected them now seemed non-existent. It was still hard for them to get beyond their days of exile, like an orphan who finds it hard to forget abandonment. The unconditional love they once knew from God now seemed just the opposite. God had loved them once, they reckoned, but obviously did so no longer. They couldn’t see, feel, or experience it in the darkness of their long night of exile. The pain and suffering of their new circumstances in life were God’s doing, they came to believe. God was mad at them and was punishing them as a result. Why else would these terrible things be happening to them if they didn’t deserve them? Why else would God no longer answer their prayers and save them?

Isaiah, fully aware of their thinking and in a place where God could use him, would bring a message to counter their conclusions about God’s love for them. As he declared about himself, *The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor . . .* He was God’s messenger that God had not forgotten about them and was already at work in their circumstances, providing comfort for their present pain. Note the present tense words

Isaiah used, like “is upon me,” and “has sent,” “has clothed me with garments of salvation,” and “has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”

Isaiah was also God’s messenger that God’s love for them would continue in the future. It was a promise for days ahead. Isaiah shifts his words from being about the present to the future, of how “they will be called oaks of righteousness,” “they shall build up,” “they shall raise up,” “they shall repair,” that God will faithfully give them their recompense,” will make an everlasting covenant with them,” and, “shall be known among the nations.” They were to know that God’s love for them was no fleeting infatuation, shallow crush, or one night stand. It was everlasting. Like committed lovers who still need to hear an “I love you” as assurance for the future, so Judah needed assurance they could live on for years to come. And so God gave it. And so God showed it.

A love expressed is a powerful thing, isn’t it? I was reminded of this through art this past week, especially in two plays Jinny and I went to. In the first one, *Wicked*, love champions over hate through the unlikely Elphaba, changing the hearts of the Wizard of OZ and the people around her who loved only themselves. She, through the power of love in action, changed them for good. As Glinda reflects in song to Elphaba, *But I know I’m who I am today Because I knew you...Like a comet pulled from orbit As it passes the sun Like a stream that meets a boulder Halfway through the wood* *Who can say if I’ve been changed for the better? But because I knew you I have been changed for good.* Then, in *Les Miserables*, love wins as well, as it is demonstrated so powerfully in the grace offered by a priest for the sins of Jean Valjean, in a people’s sacrifice for other people’s liberty, and in the promise of Jean Valjean to protect forever the child of an oppressed and dying mother. The words of the play, written by Victor Hugo, point to the power of love, like when it is said, “To love or have loved, that is enough. Ask nothing further. There is no other pearl to be found in the dark folds of life.” The power of this love was expressed most succinctly by the words at the end, “To love another person is to see the face of God.” The supremacy of love over hate, indifference, evil, and anything else in all creation is a message so prevalent in our stories, paintings, languages, and our songs. It is, however, not just a muse for playwrights, a canvass for artists, a word for our dictionaries, or lyrics for songwriters. Love is most profound and real when it is in action.

God, who is love, defines the reality of love in just that way—action. On this Third Sunday of Advent, we can know that God loves us with action. A look through the pew Bibles we dedicated today will show demonstrations of God’s love from cover to cover. In them, we see that the love God has for us is not a matter of chit chat, small talk, double speak, wishful thinking, or of unfulfilled promises. Even though we can refer to the Bible as a love letter from God, words we desperately need to hear and read, we must know they are words that God has put into action. God didn’t just tell us that He loved us; He entered our world to show us. God didn’t just use flowery adjectives to describe His feelings for us; He became a verb and lived a while among us, inserted right into our fragmented lives to make us complete.

You and I can experience this love in our present pain. It comes to us like Isaiah to his people—as good news when we are oppressed, as healing when our hearts are

brokenhearted, freedom when we are in captivity, jubilee when we are in over our heads with debt, justice when we are robbed, and comfort when we mourn. This love is an active verb, arriving to you as a garland instead of ashes, gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, reconstruction where there has been destruction, and with the clothing of salvation for the nakedness of your condition.

And, if we aren't sure about our future, of how God will respond to us there, then we must spend some more time counting the "shalls" and "wills" of this Scripture. As Mary, mother of Jesus, sang so beautifully in her Magnificat, God's actions of love for the world are a kept promise, one rooted in our past, born into our present, and awaiting us in our future. We can't help but to rejoice with Mary, as love enters our world.

The words of the Christmas Carol, *Silent Night*, which we will sing on Christmas Eve, express the actions of the arrival of this one love so well, of one who spent his life in the action of love,

*Silent night, Holy night  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord at thy birth  
Jesus, Lord at thy birth.*