

Sunday, Dec. 13, 2020 ~ Advent 3

Prelude

Announcements

Opening words: Advent Candle

The 'Love' Candle for this third week is the pink one; rose-colored for historic setting of mid-Advent Gaudete Sunday. "Gaudete" translates to that first word of 1 Thessalonians 5, which is one of the readings for this Sunday. And as the mid-point of the season, it also reflects the earlier weeks' reading of 'Messiah is coming/promised' to a more urgent 'Messiah is near.'

And what our rejoicing focuses on this week is the love of God: an everlasting love that has been poured out since the beginning of all creation, and one attested to through the prophets – including Jeremiah, which gives us one of the candle readings today:

Jeremiah 3:2-6 *This is what the LORD says: "The people who survive the sword will find favor in the wilderness; I will come to give rest to Israel."*

The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.

*I will build you up again, and you, Virgin Israel, will be rebuilt. **Again you will take up your timbrels and go out to dance with the joyful.***

Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; the farmers will plant them and enjoy their fruit.

There will be a day when watchmen cry out on the hills of Ephraim, 'Come, let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'"

In the Christmas chronology, we have both the love of God, and God's love reflected in the obedience of Mary – But behind the outward appearance and activity of love was this, our second candle reading:

John 15:12-14, 17 *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.... This is my command: Love each other.*

And so this third Sunday of Advent we come rejoicing in the knowledge and assurance that God loves us with an everlasting love... a love meant to be shared.

Music -- "Hark, the Herald Angels" [C. Wesley, 1846, alt Whitefield/Mendelssohn]

Christ, by highest heaven adored, Christ, the everlasting Lord, Late in time behold him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th'incarnate Deity, Pleased with us in flesh to dwell; Jesus, our Immanuel. [Refrain]

Refrain: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King"

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of Righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings.

Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die, Born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.

Refrain: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King"

Gathering Call and Response [based on Luke 1:46-55]

L: My soul rejoices in my God.

P: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior -

L: For God has looked upon his lowly servant and from this day all generations will cry 'blessed' as my soul rejoices in my God.

P: The Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.

L: He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

P: My soul rejoices in my God. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

L: He has come to the help of his servant Israel, remembering his promise of mercy,

All My soul rejoices in my God, in the Lord our Savior!

Unison Prayer of Invocation

We come, O God, with adoration and praise, as well as thanksgiving for the abundance of your mercy, and love.

Our anticipation grows as we come nearer to the great celebration of Jesus' birth. And while we are gathered, open our eyes to see the approaching salvation.

Open our hearts to truly receive the gift of your Son, as we join in rejoicing by means of your Spirit to acknowledge the Savior God among us. Amen.

"In My Heart There Rings" [Elton M. Roth, 1924/HopePubl]

I have a song that Jesus gave me, It was sent from heav'n above; There never was a sweeter melody, 'tis a melody of love.

In my heart there rings a melody, There rings a melody with heaven's harmony; In my heart there rings a melody; There rings a melody of love.

Responsive Reading – Isaiah 61:1-7

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,

to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning,

and to don a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated;

They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.

And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

Instead of your shame you will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace you will rejoice in your inheritance.

And so you will inherit a double portion in your land, and everlasting joy will be yours.

Music - "Of the Father's Love Begotten" [Prudentius, Aurelius Clemens, 348-410/Trans, Baker, Neale/Divine Mysterium]

Of the Father's love begotten ere the worlds began to be, He is Alpha and Omega, he the Source, the Ending he, Of the things that are, that have been; and that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

This is he whom heav'n-taught singers sang of old with one accord, Whom the Scriptures of the prophets promised in their faithful word; Now he shines, the long expected; let creation praise its Lord, evermore and evermore!

Readings: John 3:14b-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 3:14b-21

...the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not quench the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt but test them all; hold on to what is good, reject every kind of evil.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

Pastoral Prayer

Anthem

Message: " The Look of Love " –

[note, this is from sermon notes, written to be delivered, not necessarily read; but do offer some thematic examples of the Advent 3 message]

You're likely aware of those word association games – saying the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear a word. Red/? Bunny/? Cloud/?

So here's one -- What does love look like, anyway? Take a few seconds, and retrieve from your personal computer – your brain's memory – one picture of love...what does it look like?

For some it may be the picture of a loved one. A place. An anonymous image of mother and child, or a puppy. But it's more complicated than that, because in every one of those images there are a thousand words and reasons why, for you, it demonstrates love.

Or maybe it's a montage of pictures that dance in your head- multiple images, flipping one after the other, jumping in moments of time that span your lifetime and memory – times of high emotion and peak experience seared into neural cells.

The creative side of humanity has tried to capture those moments of high emotions – love among them -- from victorious cave paintings, to the pyramids. Expressions of love and joy and victory abound in every medium, preserved for as long as they last. Old master paintings, then photography. Then moving film to digital expressions.

I've been struck in recent years of the attempts to capture in photos particularly, the journeys of love: gone are the single stiff family portrait of husband and wife on a marriage day to albums of candid, videos, and live streams. Engagement albums, pregnancy portraits, family formal and fun images that go far beyond the Christmas card picture... all of them attempting to capture the inexpressible joy of love.

The images are always happy ones: joy and love go hand in hand. Like the fact we seldom build monuments to defeat but always to victory, we don't take selfies in the heat of an argument, do we? We don't keep pictures of despair to remind us that once there was joy. And love.

Well, God has put on display his portraits of love: but like the thousands of words, and depth of memory behind everyone of your photos, the "look" of God's love is deeper and more full than the capture of a moment in time. Like Christmas.

Is God's love at Christmas found in the tiny baby? In the love of the mother who gazed on him with wonder and worry? In Joseph, who stood by his fiancé – or the shepherds whose fear turned to love and joy just by seeing that miracle in the manger? Perhaps we focus so much on the birth narratives, we forget the rest...the longer story of love God demonstrated from the start.

The very start.

When God created some thing – everything – out of nothing for his good pleasure. When he made man – not gender specifically, but all humanity (which includes 'man', I know. Beings. You get it.) a reflection of his image to share love in a relationship that was, as all things at creative, "good."

The look of God's love is seen not only in those moments of transport, but can be seen (maybe even more) in defeat: Adam and Eve's disobedience was still met with mercy: God's love demonstrated in the curse, when he gave them the gift of procreation – there would be a second chance. And how many chances did Israel get?

Even our responsive reading from Isaiah speaks to that: "you will rejoice in your inheritance *and everlasting joy will be yours.*" That stirring passage with which Jesus will begin his ministry – reading it aloud in the temple to a people who will not love him immediately...even though the good news was playing itself out before their very eyes and ears.

God's love is such that he toppled kingdoms, allowed for his people then and now to make choices – the freedom of love – with which he did not always agree, yet remained faithful. Even when his created were their least faithful. Even now.

God's love is demonstrated in his word and his actions – including the most personal identification he could make: leaving his heavenly kingdom to inhabit this reality with his created. Loving us so much that his embodiment begins in the most humble of states: a naked, crying, infant. Growing in stature and grace to a man in a time and place where the very obscurity of the conditions would shine contrast on the actions and words he delivered as Jesus.

*For God so loved the world...*not only did the events get put in motion, but those events relied on the love of Jesus Christ to fulfill them in what he describes as the ultimate service of love, which we began this service with: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command....¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other."

And in loving each other, Paul reminds us to Rejoice – and give thanks in all circumstances...even the challenges.

God's love was with Daniel in the furnace. With Jonah in the fish. With David on the run and the prophet in the cave. God loved his people through the exile, despite their faults. God's love is present in the worst of trials and the best of triumphs. His blessing is his faithfulness, when we are faithless.

To your catalogue of pictures and images of love, you might add one more: the broken body and sacrificial portrait of Christ on the cross. Love extended that we might live...

Music -- "What Can I Give Him?" [Christina Rosetti, 1872]

*What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man, I would do my part; Yet what can I give Him? Give Him my heart.*

Prayer of Confession/Lord's Prayer

Creator God, we confess that we have lost sight. We are concerned with what is happening to us now, in this moment and in the time around us. In a season purposed to be holy, we can be cynical grumps – or so dazzled by the holiday lights on the homes we pass, we don't look beyond the tinsel. Driven by determined efforts to spread cheer, we don't always see the loneliness of others, or the strained faces of those who hurt and fear. Forgive us our selfishness and short-sighted behaviors, the sin that closes our hearts to the reconciliation born of your love that first Christmas and every Christmas, when you deliver to us forgiveness and the hope embodied in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with whom we may pray *Our Father...*

Music: "Sometimes Alleluia" [Chuck Girard, © 1974 Dunamis Music]

Sometimes Alleluia, Sometimes Praise The Lord; Sometimes Gently Singing, Our Hearts In One Accord

Oh let us lift our voices, Look toward the sky and start to sing Oh let us now return His love, Just let our voices ring

Sometimes Alleluia, Sometimes Praise The Lord - Sometimes Gently Singing, Our Hearts In One Accord

Oh let us feel His presence, Let the sound of praises fill the air! Oh let us sing the song of Jesus' love, To people everywhere.

Sometimes Alleluia, Sometimes Praise The Lord. Sometimes Gently Singing, Our Hearts In One Accord

Commissioning & Benediction

A sending forth reminder that God's love is always present: and we are called to be that love for each other. That in the week ahead, to seek ways to be that love for others by serving those who are hurting and in need.

Parting Music: "Of the Father's Love Begotten" [Prudentius, Aurelius Clemens, 348-410/Trans, Baker, Neale/Divine Mysterium]

*Christ, to thee, with God the Father, and, O Holy Ghost, to thee, Hymn and chant and high thanksgiving and unwearied praises be,
Honor, glory, and dominion; and eternal victory, evermore and evermore!*

Postlude