

... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing and of you, who are ROCK, REDEEMER, and COMFORTER of us all. Amen.

This Sunday, when “love” is the Advent focus, two passages bring talk of “signs” of God’s presence, God’s love, but also of God’s challenge to us to love rightly.

Signs were deeply important to ancient peoples. Think of them as symbols—tangible things pointing beyond themselves to some greater concept. In the Isaiah passage—full of the politics of the day and plenty of fear of annihilation (“they shook as the trees of a forest shake”)—The “sign” that comes up is a child. Children were often signs in the Hebrew texts and certainly as we look at this as a symbol, we see the child as the future generation. And this future is Immanuel, “God with us.” This is a sign of future, of love that doesn’t give up.

In the gospel passage, Matthew is deliberate to connect Jesus to Jewish heritage and history. Matthew’s “origin story” of Christianity begins with a long genealogy, including key figures Abraham & David. (Notice the care taken to mention the exile, Isaiah’s time, in the midst of that history). In this long list of people, we see the past struggles connected to the present, connected to the future. This special child, Jesus, is the product of a historical lineup of generations and will be the sign that God is with us into the future trials as well. The gospel writer is careful to present the ancestry of Jesus so that people will know this person is the promised one, the Messiah, anointed to carry the message of Love, embody love and charge followers with the mission to love as we are loved by God.

Then we hear of Joseph’s radical act of love in a situation that gave him every reason to walk away. First, Joseph’s plan is to quietly dismiss Mary from the engagement that she might avoid public shame and humiliation. However, in Joseph’s dream, the messenger says, “don’t be afraid to do the hard thing here... there’s a big payoff for humanity in it... this child will save his people from their sins.” So, when Joseph awoke, he did as the angel from God commanded by following through with marriage to Mary. Truly, Joseph demonstrated radical love in the face of a promise of future and the sacrifice of his own social standing in

the present. Joseph keeps his commitment to Mary and to God; the child is named Jesus.

This name, Jesus, is *Yeshua* (*Yehoshua*). It comes from the personal name for God in Hebrew, *Yahweh*, and the word 'to save' or 'deliver', *yasha*.

Therefore, *Yeshua* means 'God saves' or God delivers or God helps. In other words, Jesus' name points to his role and his purpose. Jesus came as God's instrument of salvation. There are many meanings associated with 'saves' (sozo) and so it is that we hear the phrases 'Jesus saves' or 'my deliverer', or 'rescuer' or 'helper'. The point is, as Adam Hamilton states, 'when we speak of Jesus as Savior, and his work of saving us, we are speaking of his work to deliver, rescue, or help us'.¹

What a gift of Love! One who will save us! But the question is... what are we saved from? The gospel tells us directly: the messenger says to Joseph, 'He will save his people from their sins' (v21). What a gift of Love! Perhaps we had best look closer at sin and the gift of love.

Sin is translated from Hebrew, *Hata*, or Greek, *hamartia*, and means to stray from the path or to miss the mark. In archery, missing the mark is missing the target, more specifically the very center of the target (the gold/yellow). The understanding is that there is an ideal, a target, a goal, right path that we are to follow as God's people.

The path we are meant to live is given to us in scripture...

Exodus 20:2–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21: Ten Commandments

Micah 6:8: practice justice, demonstrate loving kindness, and walk humbly/God

Mt 25: 35-45; Is 58:6-10: share food with hungry; clothe naked; have compassion for sick, stranger, and prisoner

Mt 5-6: Sermon on the Mount

¹ Hamilton, Adam. *Incarnation*. Nashville: Abingdon. 2020. Pg 50.

Mk 12:30-31; Mt 22:36-40; Lk 10:27: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself

Mt 7: 12: Do unto others as you would have them do to you

I don't know about you, but I do not always walk the right path, I miss the mark, and I sin. Our human nature is just that... we know there is a good/right path. But we get lost/wander with temptation. (Think: Adam, Eve, and the serpent).

The apostle Paul wrote of this human struggle in the letter to the Roman community of believers (7:18-19), 'I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.' Later, Paul asks the question (7:21-25), 'Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God- through Jesus Christ our Lord! Or in the words of The Message translation, 'The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.'

This, friends, is the good news of Jesus...not that we are sinners (a factual statement), but that Jesus is our savior...a gift of Love. Through Jesus, God dares to seek and save all who acknowledge their need for saving... through a relationship of love, transforming hearts and minds, drawing us along God's path of life, and delivering us from ourselves. Through Christ, we are redeemed, restored, reconciled, justified, and forgiven! Through Christ we have a future!

Remember the words Jesus spoke from the cross... 'Forgive them Father for they know not what they do'; Then later, spoken to the thief, 'this day you will be with me in paradise.'

Jesus' death on the cross demonstrates... proves God's love and God's forgiveness. And we, as followers of Christ, are called to follow ... demonstrating love and forgiveness to one another.

The only way the future is cared for is to love it like a child. We must love the child, nurture the child—or, as we use the symbolic meaning—love the future, nurture the future and that is done by being courageous enough to love differently, love fully, love in a way that nurtures all of humanity's future, not destroys it.

As Christina Rossetti wrote in 1885, Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine; Love was born at Christmas; star and angel gave the sign.

The children sing & sign the song, This little light of Mine...I'm gonna let it shine. And today learned a second verse... don't let anyone blow it (your light) out.

This is the challenge of our day... to keep shining a light... rooted in love... not letting anyone OR any circumstance blow that light out. Even when social norms and traditions want to silence your light... even when friends believe one thing and you believe differently...Let your Light & Love Shine!

May it be so. So be it. Amen.

Join in the Litany of Belief...