

December 13th, 2020

Isaiah 9:2-7 “Love is an Unexpected Gift”

Briony and I have had this ongoing issue that comes around every Advent Season. It has to do with the order in which we deal with the themes of Hope Peace, Love, and Joy. The one thing we agree on is that the third Sunday in Advent is “Pink Candle” day. Where we sometimes do not agree is whether the third Sunday is *Joy Sunday* or *Love Sunday*. Now when there’s a disagreement, typically the person who makes the proclamation believes that they are right. With Briony and I, it’s different. I think, “She’s the Administrative Assistant and she researches everything thoroughly and meticulously. Maybe she’s right.” Meanwhile, she’s thinking, “He’s the pastor. He should know these things. Maybe he’s right.” And for some reason, we think that we can solve this issue by looking at the Advent flag banners that we fly in the sanctuary every year. We think, “Well what does the pink one say?” And then when we go up to the storage room in the bell tower, we are reminded that all four banners are purple. And you’d think that after twelve years, we’d remember that all four flags are purple. But every year when I give her the preaching schedule, she’ll say, “Are you sure the third Sunday is Love and not Joy?” I’ll say, “Well the lectionary website that I use says it’s Love Sunday.” She’ll say, “Well the calendar that we get from our denomination’s General Office says it’s Joy Sunday.” The problem is, both resources agree on the scripture for the week, but whether it’s love or joy seems to be up in the air.

This year, we thought we messed it up *again* because the calendar said it was Joy Sunday, but Andra’s Advent Program that we’ve been using says it’s Love Sunday! We even had it listed as “Joy Sunday” in the Caller! So when I read Andra’s notes on this week’s text, here’s what she wrote -

The third week of Advent is *Gaudete (Gow Day Tay) Sunday* where churches either celebrate JOY *or* LOVE using the pink candle for churches who use an Advent wreath.

Yes!!! I love it that Briony and I are *both* right! We know it's pink candle Sunday. What we didn't know was it's Gaudete Sunday, and it doesn't matter! So ... for our purposes this week, we'll be focusing on love.

We said from the beginning of this season that Advent is going to look a little different this year. I'm pretty sure that when we took the banners and the tree and all the decorations down after Epiphany last year, no one would have thought about whether we would even bring them down again the next year. Remember in March, when we first went on "Shelter In Place?" Yes, it was a bummer. It was an inconvenience. But we thought, "Oh this won't be bad. Surely we'll be back together by Easter." Then after Easter passed, we thought, "Well for sure we'll have Pentecost in the Park because the Chico sun will have baked this virus out of existence by then." Then as the summer moved along we thought, "Well, we'll definitely be back in the sanctuary by Advent and Christmas." And here we are. This season has been unexpected to say the least. And thus, our focus remains centered in the prophets speaking to us from times of pain, loss, disappointment and chaos. The prophet Isaiah was certainly familiar these feelings. Isaiah's world was being upended by the Assyrians who were determined to take over the world. Meanwhile, ancient Israel had suffered long and hard, scattered and unsure of if there would ever be a "normal" again. They were busy wondering if there was a future for their way of life. Sound familiar?

What the pandemic has taught so many of us is that many of the "norms" we hold on to were fleeting, useless and honestly a bit finicky. "Oh no, we're in the Purple zone! That means 'widespread!' That's not good!" Then it was, "Oh yay! We're down to red. That means 'substantial,'" but some businesses can open up again, and we can start thinking about going back to in-person school! And we can worship inside if we choose so long as our numbers don't exceed 25% of room capacity." Then it was, "Thank goodness! We're down to Orange. That means, 'Moderate.' We still have to limit the number of people in worship, but we can eat inside restaurants now!" Then all of a sudden it

was, “Ahh! We’re back up to Purple again! We bypassed Red altogether!” And now it’s, “We’re on SUPER Purple. We’re shutting *everything* down!” We’re getting alerts on our cell phones now warning us to *stay home*! All the while we were thinking, “Why us? We’re just little old Chico! We’re not some big urban area where you’d expect this kind of spread. But it’s easy to stay focused on our own little corner of the universe where me/mine/ours rules our thoughts. Our plans. Our agenda. Our desires. Our choice.

I know Andra started our scripture this morning at the beginning of Isaiah 9. But I want to go back a few paragraphs to Isaiah 8. In the New Revised Standard that Andra read from, the chapter ends with, “They will turn their faces upwards, or they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness.” I love the way Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* phrases it: “They end up in the dark with nothing.” It’s important to reflect on where we’ve been and where we are in order to really grasp this gift that’s coming our way again. Because without centering ourselves in where we *have* been, it’s hard to imagine that God will show up with restoration and healing.

So here we are on Sunday, December 13th with one more Sunday in Advent to go until we are able to gather to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child. The days are shorter; darkness comes earlier. The weather is unpredictable. So we stay hunkered down inside instead of opening doors walking in the cold winds of the spirit and soaking up the winter sun. But that is just what this text and this week is asking of us. You say staying stuck doesn’t allow for expansive love. The kind of love that an Advisor, a Peacemaker, a Bringer of Love will bring forth because of God’s never ending love for God’s people. You might miss that radical love-bringer if you are just doing the same old-same old and going about a rote way of living. This week we celebrate with Isaiah! Despite the terrors of the night; despite the leaders whose actions are vastly unloving; despite the political melee that churns around us; despite the doubts we have in this moment, we gather in love— DESPITE the

horrors, the dangers, the distressing, the chaos. Because in the birth of the One foretold, we hear again a call to faith and acts of love that has always been there for God's people. God is love. Again and again. This year and next. No matter what.

So ... how do we stay focused on love this week? Well ... this is where I call in the kids to help us out. There are all sorts of ways to stay focused on love. But you've got to help us remember, okay?

KID'S and ADULT MOMENT -

Supplies: Place on a table strips of paper, tape, markers.

Directions: In these moments, consider the acts of love you have seen this week. Write the act down (*1 per strip*) and create an acts of love prayer chain. Use the tape to connect your strips to loop together as a way of connecting your prayers to others. For those of you at home, keep adding to your chain as we prepare to welcome LOVE back into our world on Christmas Eve.