

Love the Lord is on the Way
based on Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, David Jahnke, 12/13/14

This week in our small groups, we were taken on the likely Journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Mary was at least four months pregnant by the time they got to Bethlehem because she had already spent three months with her cousin Elizabeth who lived not far from Bethlehem. And whereas the traditional picture has her ready to give birth at any minute and doing so as soon as they arrive, the text only says that “While they were in Bethlehem, it came time for Mary to give birth.”

So in place of the rather arduous and ominous traditional picture of the journey, I would like to propose something very different. The text in Luke says that Joseph was pledged to be married to Mary. So maybe the journey was long and hard but not hurried and dangerous and anxiety-filled. I want to propose that it was a hopeful and joyous journey with the two of them looking forward to the wedding that would be held in Joseph’s hometown with other relatives who were coming because of the census.

For portions of the ten day trip, they were surrounded by hundreds of thousands of olive trees which gave silent witness to the baby inside Mary. Olive oil was used to anoint the high priest and King of Israel and Messiah means anointed one. [The Journey d.v.d., Rev. Adam Hamilton]

Jesus was anointed another time in the middle of his ministry— not by an aristocrat or priest but by a sinful woman—likely a prostitute who rushed into the house of a Pharisee, unwelcomed, to anoint Jesus with perfume. After being used and mistreated by so many men, she had found the one who would save and honor her. Tears of joy and gratitude and hope washed Jesus’ feet and she dried them with her hair. Then she poured perfume on his feet and completed her anointing. Jesus pointed all that she did for him and all that the righteous Pharisee had not. He announced that her sins had been forgiven and the proof was the outpouring of her love.

Jesus told her to go in peace; that her faith had saved her. Would she go back to her old life or would she wed herself to Jesus and follow him? I pose the same question to you. Is this a season of expecting things to be perfect in your homes and lives, like the Pharisee? Or do you know your need for the liberating grace of God in Jesus? Because it is only when you know how much you need mercy and how much God has showered upon you that you start to love him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and thus find the joy and praise that he wants for and from you?

Isaiah wrote that he was anointed by God. He was in Babylon when the Persian King Cyrus— another Messiah or anointed figure-- freed his people from Babylonian captivity. And you can imagine their joy and their hope when they were told that they could go home to the land of their ancestors.

A wondrous mystique about Israel must have developed over the 50-70 years they had been away. They regularly remembered the wonderful history of Kings David and Solomon; the great prosperity and power they had gained for their people. They remembered all the great Old Testament stories of his blessing them in the land of milk and honey and olives and figs. And then of course there was the great City of David, Jerusalem, and the glory of the temple.

But once they were back, things did not go at all as they expected. There was division between the returnees and the descendants of those who had been left behind. Their cities were still in ruins and they really struggled to rebuild. In fact, things may have been better for them in the great city of Babylon where these descendants of aristocrats and priests had likely prospered. So they had been freed but they still felt like captives. They had been saved but they still were mourning.

A commentator pointed out the root of their mourning, “[Their] mourning rose out of ...the failure to reconcile the economic disparities and the religious and political factions within the city.” [Elna K. Solvang, commentary on Isaiah 61 online] Sound at all familiar? The more things change...the more they stay the same.

Our disappointment and angst are not limited to societal problems. We feel them personally and in our homes as well, sometimes especially when the expectations are high, like at Christmastime.

We just sent this postcard out to most families in Fanwood. I mentioned how this season which is supposed to celebrate the coming and salvation of God in Christ Jesus can be such a stressful and joyless time for the lonely and even for those who have a lot of family gathering together.

Our small groups last week looked at Mary’s visit to Elizabeth. When she entered her home, Elizabeth’s baby inside her leaped for joy at the coming of Jesus who was in Mary’s womb into their house.

I asked the ladies if the coming of Christ in the flesh at Christmas brought them a similar joy and excitement. I kind of received a lot of blank stares; one kind of rolled her eyes and another said, "I have to be honest with you. Christmas brings me a lot of busy-ness and tiredness and anxiety. I love a lot of it but you want everything to be just right, and sometimes it isn't..." And there was much head-nodding and agreement with personal examples shared.

Isaiah had a Word for his people who were delivered but disappointed; those given new life but were still mourning and afraid. The Spirit had anointed him to bring good news; to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the year of the Lord's favor; 3 to give them... the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." Liberty for captives, not rules or laws that must be followed! The Lord's Favor, not our perfection! A mantle of praise because of who God is, not a faint and tired spirit because of what we do or do not do!

At the presbytery meeting the other night, we are asked to mark all of the emotional mountains and valleys in this passage on a wavelength. And to locate ourselves somewhere therein. I showed everyone the flatline that I drew across the center of the wave and told them that was how I felt. But Isaiah's joy convicted me. And I quoted the Psalmist who said, "Why are you downcast, oh my soul?"

Despite all of the turmoil around him, Isaiah greatly rejoiced in the LORD. He said "...my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness just as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels." And this was not just an individual thing. He knew that God was rebuilding his nation and would complete that good work in his time. And Isaiah knew that His Word and His Spirit would be a part of that rebuilding of God's people.

This is what God wants for us in this Christmas. He has wed Himself to us in an everlasting covenant of love. And even though we are far from perfect, much less our society, He is perfect. And he came once to show us what things will look like when creation is perfected. And he promised that he would come again to perfect it! And in the meantime, he has clothed us with His Spirit of Love. We are dressed up in it and honored by it every day as if it were our wedding day! And that Spirit of Love is gradually winning the day not only in us and in our homes but in all the world...which may be a little bit more difficult to believe but it is happening.

I watched a documentary this week called “A Loving Story” about a white redneck named Dick Loving in rural Virginia who fell in love with a half-black and half Indian woman named Mildred. They were married in Washington D.C. in 1958. And upon returning to their hometown, they were arrested and jailed for violating the prohibition on interracial weddings. They were then exiled from Virginia.

Fast forward to 1967 and a couple of young Jewish lawyers represent the white southerner and his black wife in front of the Supreme Court. This was just three years before I was born.

One of the lawyers shared how Dick did not generally have much to say, but the day before the Supreme Court hearing, he told the lawyer to just let the judges know that he loved his wife.

Love was victorious in the end. And so it will at the end of time. And in the meantime, love is slowly and surely gaining the upper hand. What heretofore seemed the most natural thing in the world and which reigned in history; that is putting up defenses around me and my tribe while suspecting, not trusting and certainly not wedding ourselves to other tribes; this is gradually being overcome by the Spirit of Christ who is overcoming all divisions. All the peoples of the earth are being refined by God’s truth and welcomed by His love into one blessed family.

There is so much to rejoice in; so much to hope for. God is already rebuilding and reshaping our hearts, our minds, our cities. And I do trust that much good will come out of the current turmoil. And that is because Love is the Lord over all things already. I am more sure of this than ever. And as we will sing at the end of the service, Love the Lord is on the way...to consummate God’s wedding with all His people and with creation.

And after the Israelites' long jour

In today's Old Testament

I think that

Now I want to come to

The hatred poured out upon her by her people was replaced by Jesus' love and a favor that transformed everything.

Jon has already anointed us with the Lord's favor

And she would anoint Jesus...

I was anointed with oil recently by the pastor the Garden of Eden Church...

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; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion-- to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Bitter-sweet return from exile...; much angst and division between newcomers and old-timers; much disappointment in the state of affairs of a less than KOG type atmosphere.

61:8 For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

61:9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

61:11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Assuring Hailey that I would not bring up the black-white thing in America...and not keeping my word. Well this is not my Word so I should have known better...; I cannot control what God has to say and he wanted to wrap a little trilogy of sermons on the subject.

But today is really not about the black white thing in America. Other than a sign of that being completely overcome in the end.

I watched a movie this week called A Loving Story about a white redneck named Dick Loving in rural Virginia who fell in love with a half-black and half Indian woman named...; and a couple of young Jewish lawyers who represented them in front of the Supreme Court in 1967—just three years before I was born.

And Love was victorious in the end. And that is what will be. Love is slowly and surely gaining the upper hand. And it will reign over all creation in the fullness of time.

Love the Lord is on the way!! We will be singing this delightful advent song at the end of the service. Love is the Lord of all things and love is on the way to make all things right!

I mentioned last week how Isaiah had good news for the Israelites exiled in Babylon. A messiah from Persia-- King Cyrus— would set them free and they would be able to return home.

Can you imagine their joy that day when they were told that they could go home to the land of their ancestors? A certain mystique about the land must have grown over the 50-70 years they had been away. The wonderful history of Kings David and Solomon; the great prosperity and power they gained

for their people; the stories of God's leading his people to this land of milk and honey and olives and figs and blessing them in it. And in the center was the glory of the temple.

After God led them back through the Babylonian wilderness, things were not as they expected.

The anointing of God's people by the Spirit of God leading to joy and praise and hope in the midst of much broken-ness.

Bitter-sweet return from exile...; much angst and division between newcomers and old-timers; much disappointment in the state of affairs of a less than KOG type atmosphere.

Cities still in ruin from when the Babylonians conquered Israel some 70 years earlier; not very much had been done while these exiles were away. They had been freed by the anointed Gentile named Cyrus from Persia; salvation had finally come to Babylon and they had made their way through the wilderness only to find a nation in ruins.

"The mourning in Isaiah 61 rises out of frustration and humiliation over the failure to rebuild the city and the temple to match its former glory and the failure to reconcile the economic disparities and the religious and political factions within the city."

How similar sounding...and tied directly to Jesus' coming and the return from exile experienced there.