

Canticle 15: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant. *Amen*

Introduction

Sermons on love are often so lofty the subject—God’s love—becomes too other worldly and abstract, beyond human grasp, and of no earthly good. These sermons leave congregants grasping at the actuality of God’s love like grasping at oil; there’s nothing in your hand but the residual of what brushed past it. Preachers get in pulpits on Sunday and proclaim the word of comfort—God loves the beloved and the beloved is us (all of us)—then turn around and make that word so abstract and comfortable the divine love communicated *about* is not communicated *to* those who have ears to hear. It’s safer to preach abstract love that doesn’t touch down in the material realm in action and conviction because God forbid those coins cease hitting beloved coffers. We love the idea of divine love for us. If we’re honest, we don’t know what that means apart from some safe ideas we’ve memorized from Sunday school, gathered from the repetition of creeds, and absorbed by the incessant bombardment of dogmas.

Love is a remarkable and profound thing surging through the cosmos since the beginning of time—love neither started with us nor will it end with us. While the neuro response to love—both loving and being loved—is locatable in the brain and we can describe the way it feels, science and her scientists cannot figure out the why or the source or, coupled to attraction, the reason it’s this person and not that person. While society has historically tried to dictate who we can love, love knows not artificial *man*-made boundaries—love transcends and tears down walls and fences built to keep some in and others out. Love is more than a feeling and full of action in a material world.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because 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, and the day of vengeance of our God...” (Is. 61:1-2b)

Isaiah begins by confessing: the “spirit of the Lord God is upon” me. He speaks of something beyond comfortable feeling; he speaks of *ruah*. *Ruah*, a word used to describe the breath of God animating soil in Genesis, is the *spirit* of God, the pathos, the passion, and the emotion of God.¹ It is this spirit that is *upon* Isaiah. This spirit anoints Isaiah...to do what? Not to perform sacrifices, not to stand high and mighty, not to be clad in fancy robe behind tables decorated with gold and fine stone, not to swing incense, to be solemn, or to be feared for his authority.² Rather, it’s significantly humbler than we could imagine.

¹ Abraham J. Heschel *Prophets* NY, NY: JPS, 1962. 315. “The word *ruah* means, according to standard dictionaries, ‘air in motion, breath, wind, vain things, spirit, mind.’ What was not noticed is that one of the chief uses of the word *ruah* is to denote pathos, passion or emotion—the state of the soul. When combined with another word, it denotes a particular type of pathos or emotion.”

² Heschel *Prophets* 195 “Sacred fire is burning on the altars in many lands. Animals are being offered to the glory of the gods. Priests burn incense, songs of solemn assemblies fill the air Pilgrims are on the roads, pageantries in the

Isaiah's anointing by the spirit of God is to herald good tidings to the oppressed, to bind and have mercy on the suffering, and to proclaim liberty to the captives. In other words, it's to proclaim to God's people God's great love for them.

Isaiah speaks of being endowed with the proclamation of God's dynamic and active love to God's people (*Ruah*). He also speaks of a divine day of favor and divine day of vengeance. Isaiah intentionally throws allusion to the year of Jubilee detailed in the book of Leviticus (*cf.* chapter 25). The liberative activity of God's love coming in material form to God's people is physical and not merely psychological—debts forgiven freeing both the debtor and the creditor.³ Thus, the juxtaposition here of God's favor and day of vengeance is intriguing. Make no mistake, Isaiah is intentional with his words. And I'm sure, as we like to do, that day of vengeance is sitting a bit heavy. But don't lose heart just yet, stay with me; this isn't bad news. The day of favor and the day of vengeance are one and the same day.

The twin divine decree sounding from Isaiah's mouth is one of comfort *and* confrontation, and both are oriented toward the divine art of divine love: God loves God's people. Isaiah is exhorted by the spirit being upon him...

“...to comfort all who mourn; 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.” (Is. 61:2c-3).

To comfort those who mourn is to confront those who caused the mourning; to take away ashes and crown with garlands is to raise up those who were made low and to remove the distinction with those who were (already) raised up, thus lowering them; to embolden spirits is to give strength to those who are weak making them as strong as those who were strong. To bring comfort to captives through their liberation is to come into confrontation with captors by liberating them from holding captive. To bring good news to the oppressed is to confront the oppressor and illuminate the oppressor's own oppression in the system. God's love liberates *all* people from violent and oppressive kingdoms of humanity.⁴

“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. 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” (Is. 61:8-9)

sacred places. The atmosphere is thick with sanctity. In Israel, too, sacrifice is an essential act of worship. It is the experience of giving oneself vicariously to God and of being received by Him. And yet, the pre-exilic prophets uttered violent attacks on sacrifices...”

³ Brevard Childs *Isaiah: A Commentary* TOTL. Louisville, KY: WJK 2001. 505. “...the theme of proclaiming liberty in ‘the year of Yahweh’s favor’ (v.2) is formulated in the language of the Jubilee year...and articulates succinctly the great change in Israel’s fortunes initiated through God’s favor. Finally, to ‘bring good tiding’ ... is to assume the mantle of the herald...who first sent out the message of God’s return to his people in power.”

⁴ Childs *Isaiah* 506. “It has also been rightly pointed out that the description of Israel’s deliverance has shifted a way from Second Isaiah’s portrayal of captivity and exile to that of release from economic slavery within the land.”

Isaiah proclaims God's desire: justice. God loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing. Echoing other prophets of Israel: God cares about those who are suffering under and because of unjust systems. For Isaiah and the other prophets of Israel, there is a tight link between God's love of justice and our right worship. There's no way around it. You can be the most pious person, wear all the right robes, say the words, bow here and kneel there, you can perform the most sacred of ceremonies, but if you are also actively participate and uphold oppressive and violent systems in word and deed, your worship is "detestable" to God.⁵ According to Isaiah, there's one way to serve God: love. Specifically, the love of neighbor in the pursuit of God defined justice and righteousness, mercy and peace.⁶

Let us not forget the way Isaiah opened up this proclamation: "'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me.'" (Is. 1). It's come full circle. This spirit which is also God's desire and pathos has become Isaiah's.⁷ The math here is simple: being indwelt with God's spirit, Isaiah's desire is the same as God's: a love of justice and dislike of robbery and wrongdoing. Thus, it is for us. As those encountered by God in the event of faith, brought out of death into new life, that new life in the world is marked by the pathos of God: active love for justice and righteousness, mercy and peace.⁸

Conclusion

"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" (Is. 61:11)

⁵ Heschel *Prophets* 195, "However, while Samuel stressed the primacy of obedience over sacrifice, Amos and the prophets who followed him not only stressed the primacy of morality over sacrifice, but even proclaimed that the worth of worship, far from being absolute, is contingent upon moral living, and that when immorality prevails, worship is detestable."

⁶ Heschel *Prophets* 195. "Questioning man's right to worship through offerings and songs, they maintained that the primary way of serving God is through love, Justice, and righteousness." See also: W. Travis McMaken's book on Helmut Gollwitzer, *Our God Loves Justice: An Introduction to Helmut Gollwitzer* (Fortress Press, 2017). "These, then, are the principles—or facets of God's identity as revealed in Jesus Christ—that guide Christian political responsibility: peace, justice, and mercy," p. 91.

⁷ Childs *Isaiah* 506. "The speaker in these verses is clearly God, who confirms the word of the servant figure. The grounds for the mission of the one endowed with the spirit in vv. 1-7 rest on God, who loves justice while hating injustice."

⁸ McMaken *Our God Loves Justice* "These, then, are the principles—or facets of God's identity as revealed in Jesus Christ—that guide Christian political responsibility: peace, justice, and mercy." 91 And, Speaking in terms of principle, however, the demand is more exacting...'The conversion to which the Christian community is daily called by God's Word also includes the renunciation of their integration in the dominant system of privileges and their active exertion for justice, and so for social structures no longer determined by social privileges'...Christians are called to resist the social structures that imbue some with privileges while disadvantaging others." 113-4 . And, "But if Marx turns theology into politics, Gollwitzer transforms politics into theology. That is, he clarifies for us that there is no such things a theologically neutral political position. Either one advocates and undertakes political steps to combat the socioeconomic privilege that oppresses immense swaths of the world's population, or one is a heretic—unfaithful to the God encountered in the event of faith. For this 'wholly other God wants a wholly other society' in which all forms of privilege are abolished and social structures ever increasingly approximate the true socialism of the kingdom of God. And why does God want this? Because our God loves justice." 166-7.

God's will *will* be done on earth as it is in heaven, Isaiah proclaims. God's love will triumph. In other words, divine justice and righteousness prevails over injustice and unrighteousness. The day of divine favor for the oppressed will be the day of vengeance for the oppressor and love will win both out of death into life.

But...How? In a dire and precarious way no one expects: a baby born to a young woman. God will descend into the human predicament to suffer the human predicament and will not remain above it. This is divine love: to come low, to descend to the beloved. "The coming of Jesus is the bond, the event of descending love, is the appearing of new life, of life undreamt of, of eternal life in the earthly life."⁹

Born thy people to deliver,
born a child, and yet a king,
born to reign in us for ever,
now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Love drives us toward and into each other's burdens, to share the weight, to call things as they are, to provide relief and to comfort. This love knows no bounds, it descends to the depths of human existence, into the muck and mire of suffering and pain and grief; it searches out across vast spaces looking for the beloved who is missing; it surges into the fringes and margins of society to proclaim in word *and* deed "*Beloved*" to those who've only heard "*unlovable*".¹⁰ It's not found in our personal piety defined by the superiority of our self-righteousness, it's not found in glory but in humility,¹¹ not in gold but in wood, not in rich and clean robes in stone buildings but swaddled in rags in a manger.

⁹ Helmut Gollwitzer *The Way to Life* Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1981. 80.

¹⁰ Gollwitzer 79. "...he did not remain above, did not count his superiority a thing to be grasped at, but came down into human existence, into a slave-existence, to a place where he was spat upon, trodden down, and put to death. Thus anyone who wishes to find the 'above' of which the whole Bible speaks, must, w strange though it may seem, go right down below here on earth. The paradox is that what is of the earth, the thought that is of earthly origin, is actually a striving upwards, everyone wants to get on top; while on the contrary what is here called the true divine 'above', is a string downwards, and is only to be found at the lowest point of the earth, on the gallows among the most downtrodden and outcast of society, with one who has no longer a place in it, in the grave which is the destiny of us all."

¹¹ Gollwitzer 79. "There in the depths the Lord of glory of the religions is not to be found, but the servant God of the Gospel, the ministering, self-sacrificing brother Jesus who 'and no other one' is the living Lord of the Gospel."