

Magnificent Love

Isaiah 6: 1-4. 8-11

Luke 1:46b-55

Dec 17, 2023 Advent 3

Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Isaiah 6: 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; 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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

Luke 1:46b-55

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

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First lines, opening verses. We are usually very good at identifying a familiar hymn, a song, a well-known book or bible verse by its beginning. It is a quick recognition.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!ⁱ

O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphantⁱⁱ

Wise men say only fools rush in but I can't help falling in love with youⁱⁱⁱ

We've only just begun to live, white lace and promises^{iv}

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times^v

That Sam-I-am. I do not like that Sam-I-am.^{vi}
In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.^{vii}
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.^{viii}
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.^{ix}

With no other prompts or context, we know opening lines and lyrics so well that we hear them with the cadence they are spoken or the tune that is sung. We are drawn in instantly into the familiar, the comfortable, as we know where this is all going.

But if you heard ‘now in flesh appearing,’ or ‘workin’ together day to day,’ or ‘it was a dark and stormy night,’ or ‘and Joseph died, being one hundred and ten years old,’ it would be harder to connect the words to where they belong. It would take some thought, and perhaps a Google search, and not just a reflex recall.

However the last lines are often and easily glossed over as though we stop reading before the ending. We don’t tend to pay as much attention to the end as the beginning, and we actually end up missing something important.

This is true of our Scripture passages this morning as well. You might not know just where in Isaiah the words are found:

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; to comfort all who mourn.....

But you *know* they are a part of every Advent season and that in time Jesus reads these very words in his hometown synagogue as he is beginning his earthly ministry.

But Isaiah’s *last* words in the passage:

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. 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. 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.....

These are not familiar words yet they are a wonderful expression of hope and promise. We are called among the descendants, among the nations, a part of God’s everlasting covenant. The same Spirit that rested upon Isaiah’s words now dwells within us, clothing us with the ‘garments of salvation’, empowering us to live as witnesses of Christ’s love. The words reminds us that just as the earth yields new life and growth, so too will righteousness and praise flourish among all nations. Isaiah’s words are a poetic and inspiring sense of renewal, a promise of goodness, and an invitation to celebrate the divine. The last words of the passage remind us these are not just ancient words, but our new and now story too.

First words we know, last words we do not, is certainly true for our Gospel passage.

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

Mary’s Magnificat, her song of praise to God, was revolutionary, was table turning and table flipping. She sang about the overthrow of the world order; she sang of a reversal of fortunes for the poor; she sang of justice for the oppressed. Her song envisioned a hopeful future. Because

Mary knew that the baby within her would pave the way for that future, she had a joy that could not be contained. In Mary's womb was the very power of God which would burst upon the world in the form of Jesus Christ. He would live and speak in ways which would challenge and threaten every form of injustice and unrighteousness. No person, no institution, no nation could withstand Him. This was Mary's vision, dream and joy.^x

The last line, the easily overlooked line, in Mary's great song of praise and revolution, 'He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever,' means that everything Mary sings about is rooted in this promise.

We almost miss this as we are swept up in Mary's tender, profound opening words of the Magnificat. This promise, what the Dean of Duke University Chapel, Luke Powery^{xi} calls God's ancient promissory note to us, which is weaved all throughout scripture, as the whole Bible is God's promissory note. "It's a divine promise over time, across time and culture and people and language and tradition, through peculiar politics and through painful pandemics. It's ancient. It's long. It's eternal. It's older than old and still newer than new." It is the everlasting covenant in Isaiah, it is what Advent is all about, as we wait for God's promise to be fulfilled.

How do we respond to waiting for this promise, for God's everlasting covenant with Abraham's descendants? Advent reminds us that this season of waiting for light to break into darkness, for promises to be fulfilled, for the first to be last and the last to be first, is a time for hope, for peace, for love, for joy.

The last line in the Bible, in God's promissory note, is a blessing. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.^{xii}

ⁱ Amazing Grace-John Newton

ⁱⁱ O Come , All Ye Faithful- John F. Wade

ⁱⁱⁱ Can't Help Falling in Love-Elvis Presley

^{iv} We've Only Just Begun-The Carpenters

^v A Tale of Two Cities-Charles Dickens

^{vi} Green Eggs and Ham- Dr. Seuss

^{vii} Genesis 1:1

^{viii} Psalm 23

^{ix} Matthew 5:3

^x <https://www.preaching.com/sermons/advent-the-joyful-justice-of-god-isaiah-611-4-8-11-luke-146-55/>

^{xi} <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/12.11.22>

^{xii} Revelation 22: 21