

St James United Church

Message for December 17, 2023

Third Sunday of Advent



“The Work of Mercy”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 1:47-55; and Matthew 1:18-25

As we draw closer to Christmas, people are working at their many holiday tasks - shopping for gifts, adding finishing touches to the decor, giving their homes a clean, doing some baking. We're having our bake sale and luncheon to help people check off at least one of those tasks. Yet as we sang after the candle lighting about working for God, I have a feeling that shopping, cleaning, baking, isn't the intended work needing every hand and head and heart.

I believe we get a sense of what that work actually is as Isaiah offers words of comfort to the people who returned from exile. He shares a vision of restoration and healing, the hurt that they carried from all that they'd experienced lifted away. He uses the language of Jubilee when on a fiftieth-year people marked a Sabbath of Sabbath years. Debts were to be forgiven, the enslaved set free, those whose land had been taken to have their heritage returned, the land allowed to rest. It's about restored relationships with the Jubilee a way for the social order to get reset, to remove barriers between people so they could treat each other as siblings again.

We hear this idea expressed in our Gospel as Joseph learns about Mary's pregnancy. The author of Matthew tells us Joseph was a good man, and he was. By their traditions he had the right to call Mary out in public and accuse her of infidelity, but that would have been a death sentence. His plan to divorce her in secret was a kind thing but God was calling him to go beyond that though even what he planned bucked the norm, and not let what happened come between them, but bring Mary into his home and accept Jesus as his son. God was calling him to show mercy, to express the compassion at the very heart of God.

Mercy is what I've been talking about these last two weeks. It's what motivates us to respond to an issue in the world and the reason we seek peace if we've hurt someone, the same mercy which was to be the heart of Jesus' ministry. This is the context of Gabriel telling Joseph to call the child Jesus because he'll save people from their sins. Generally, when we hear "sin", we think in personal terms as I shared last week. But our reading has something else in mind, tied to the name Joseph is to give the boy. We get the name Jesus in English via Greek then Latin. But Jesus in Hebrew is Yeshua or Joshua, the successor of Moses who led the people across the Jordan to the land where they'd be free, could live as a beloved community, not with some lording it over others as they experienced in Egypt, but compassionately looking after each other, and finding ways to reset the relationship when they didn't. Jesus' ministry was to reflect what we read in Isaiah, the sin Jesus saves us from not individual wrongs (we do need to be

aware of these and ask forgiveness if we hurt someone) but a deeper sin of which our actions are a symptom, a web of unjust relationships like what the people experienced in Egypt, in Babylon, under Rome, that we experience in various interests of our world fighting for control. This is what Mary sang in her song to Elizabeth. God was going to feed the hungry because so many were hungry in a world that favoured the few over the many, a world not unlike our own. Mary sang of a world restored to balance through mercy, and it was by showing mercy that Jesus brought that balance, as he treated everyone as an equal, offered compassion, showed them they're worthy of love and respect, and called his disciples, including us, to do the same.

I'd like to share a story of what this looks like in our context, especially with everything that is going on in our world. It's a reflection from Arab-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye in her poem "Kindness at Gate A-4". She was at the Albuquerque Airport and heard an announcement: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate." Now her Arabic is poor, and she didn't know what the situation was. Even though A-4 was the gate for her flight, I can imagine she was tempted to wait. But she went. When she got there an older woman dressed in a traditional Palestinian dress was on the floor, wailing. Based on comments she made later in the poem, everyone is on edge, nervous. "Help," said the staff person. "We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this." Naomi put her arm around her and spoke haltingly in Arabic. On hearing words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled. At that point Naomi could have sat down but instead she called the woman's son and assured him she'd stay with his mother, then called her other sons for fun, then Naomi's dad, some Palestinian poets she knew so they could chat with her. After two hours the older woman was laughing, telling Naomi of her life, sharing homemade cookies with her and all the women at the gate, the staff started giving out free drinks. As Naomi looked around the gate she thought, "this is the world I want to live in, a shared world, where no one, once the crying of confusion stopped, was apprehensive about another". Naomi made this possible because she showed mercy.

This is God's work, showing mercy in the face of a hurting world where we seem stuck on a path that makes it too easy to hurt others. I don't want you to feel bad about that. We judge ourselves too easily, which is why when we hear the word sin we think of our own actions. So we need to start with showing ourselves mercy, because we didn't create this web of unjust relationships. But when we wake to it, we show mercy to others and bit by bit barriers come down, people are set free, relationships restored. It doesn't happen right away. It takes work on our part, facing our fear, being honest about where we have bought into the system, going against it like Joseph did, but all ways we share in Jesus' saving ministry.

In the end, I wonder if the work we do for the holidays is actually an example of what I've been talking about, a way for us to create spaces where everyone is shown they are welcome, loved, respected, cared for, strangers as well as friends, in one beloved community. It's about our intention to share in God's work, each hand and head and heart involved in restoring relationships and healing hearts, one merciful act at a time. Amen.