

“Make Way for Love!”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our souls might be opened to the power of your surprising love. In the name of the One coming into the world, Amen.

Imagine this scene with me for a moment: John, son of Zechariah – he wasn’t “the Baptist” yet – is a teenager, complaining to his mom. He has a sort of Kylo Ren whining affect, which Elizabeth is very patient with. “They just don’t get me, mom! Nobody gets me!”

Elizabeth is patient because she knows he’s right. Fast forward 15 years, and still nobody really gets him. “Who are you?” the priests and Levites demanded. Are you this? Are you that? Why won’t you fit into any of our pre-conceived categories? We don’t know how to deal with you. We don’t have a label for you, so we don’t know whether to condemn you or promote you! But by now John has found the words from within his tradition to claim his identity: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”

Have you ever noticed that the ways God’s love arrives in the world are often confusing and sometimes even surprising? We think we know what’s going to happen, how things generally unfold, but then there’s a twist and the thing we were expecting bursts forth from an unanticipated direction or in a form we hadn’t imagined. Mary wasn’t expecting to have a baby that soon, and Joseph certainly

wasn't either. Once Mary got used to the idea, suddenly, she finds out they have to travel all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of some ridiculous new tax law. And then, of course, there's the star of today's story, Cousin John. Nobody had really heard tell of the Messiah having a herald. Especially not such a wild and wooly one, with his extreme rhetoric about repentance and baptism. "Who are you?" the priests demanded. How dare you be so surprising and uncategorizable?

There is a fascinating tension all through the gospels surrounding the expected and surprising nature of Jesus as Messiah. The gospel writers clearly have a vested interest in placing Jesus squarely within their Jewish tradition, by noting all the many ways he fulfilled the prophecies about the Messiah. But they also can't avoid and sometimes even celebrate the ways in which he redefined the expectations of what the Messiah was all about.

Arriving to fulfill centuries of longing while simultaneously upending every conventional expectation about that fulfillment was never going to be an easy road. My guess is that Jesus was grateful for Cousin John preparing the way, not despite his dramatic way of doing it, but because of it. John was breaking up the ground to receive the seeds of the Word, opening hearts and minds so they could welcome the expected good news that was coming in unexpected ways. Even so, when Jesus stood up in the temple in Nazareth to read the passage we heard this morning from Isaiah, they still weren't ready. And by "not ready" I mean they tried to throw him off a cliff!

How is it that God's love can still be so surprising? Why is it taking so long for us to adjust our expectations about how this is going to unfold? Because, if we're honest, we're still a little weirded out by Cousin John, aren't we? With his camel's hair clothes and locust-eating and a-little-too-loud demands that we repent? It's Christmastime, why are you trying to make us think about our sins, John?

It seems to me that if God's love is constantly surprising us it's partially because we're continually forgetting how God's love works. We'd love to be assured that God's love is intended to make us feel warm and fuzzy all the time, to ensure our prosperity and domestic tranquility, to make us feel special and chosen and safe. Far too often, we unconsciously try to put God's love in a container – a nice, little box – so it can be *ours*, to attend to as we have need or desire to do so. Surprise! God's love will not be contained in any box, no matter how festive or fancy – or deserving. All the while we're trying to make God's love *ours*, the Spirit of the Lord is breaking through everywhere it can to insist that God's love is everyone's. God's love doesn't arrive in our lives to make us fat and happy, contented and complacent, but rather to call us into action. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ... to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives...” In other words, not to accept things as they are, but to speak and act to shift the world toward the way God intends for it to be, not just for us but for everyone.

Is such a way of receiving God's love even possible in the middle of a pandemic? You'd be surprised! No, really, we'll probably be surprised. Even now, as

our world is changing on a daily basis, God is doing something new that is simultaneously the same, old story of bringing good news to the oppressed and binding up the brokenhearted. We are surrounded by opportunities to make way for love. You don't necessarily have to dress or behave as unconventionally as Cousin John did in order to prepare the way for Christ's coming, but there will no doubt be some repentance involved for all of us. We must repent of the fancy, little boxes we've tried to keep God's love in, all the ways we've drawn lines showing who is deserving and who isn't, all the times we rejected what God was doing because it didn't fit into our pre-conceived notions of what God should be doing.

As we repent of our narrowness of heart and mind, the Spirit of the Lord will fall upon us, even as the Christ Child arrives in our midst. We have no shortage of opportunities to comfort those who mourn. We have so many ways to braid garlands of hope and joy and to distill the oil of gladness and praise. In the midst of a season of death, we must embody, live out, and share God's death-defying love. There are plenty of ruined cities for us to repair and build up, plenty of prisoners whose release we can advocate for, plenty of robbery and wrongdoing to make right. The love that comes down at Christmas won't be contained in festive boxes; it breaks forth singing the harmonies of justice and righteousness. Cousin John surprises us again this year with this call to make way for love! And more surprises follow as we discover that God has been equipping us all along for this work, through the power of Christ's love. Hallelujah and Amen!