

“Ooh, Heaven is a Place on Earth” based Isaiah 63:1-4, 8-11, John 1:1-18

Delivered on December 13, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

Each week, your bulletin has devotional prayers and study tools printed on the back page. There are a couple of prayers, that reinforce the message of the week – one for the morning and one for the evening, and a suggested scripture reading for each day. Being resilient and faithful, especially in the world today, requires spending time in scripture and in prayer. You don't have to use the bulletin as your resource, but I strongly recommend you use this or another resource to spend time in scripture and prayer.

With that said, one of our loyal users of the bulletin devotional expressed some frustration, recently. She asked why I was having you read the book of Numbers with all the lists of people. You see, every Monday is a chapter from the Torah, or first five books. We started in Genesis, recently finished Exodus, we skipped Leviticus (I'll get to why shortly), and now we are reading through the book of Numbers. This book begins with a census of all the tribes of Israel, with a description of their encampment. So, why is so much time spent on this census, listing all the people in Israel?

For the Israelites, it preserves their history and God's activity in that history, but for Christians, we look at the bible as a story that includes the New Testament, and so we look at how everything fits together, including how this relates to today's scriptures. At the end of the book of Exodus, there is a lot of talk about the tabernacle, what is in it for decoration, the ark of the covenant, every detail. But then at the end, Moses himself is not allowed to enter it.

Then comes the book of Leviticus. This is a code of conduct. It has the rules for this particular community to have this tabernacle, and rules for priests, like Moses and the Levites descended from his brother Aaron to enter into God's presence. We skipped this in our reading plan, not because it isn't important, but because it isn't narrative. By jumping to Numbers, we continue the narrative story of the people of Israel and so we go from building of the tabernacle to the numbering of the people of God. Why does this matter? Why would it be so important to get to this transition?

Well, in doing so we get to see the point of all that God is doing in the larger story. We see the point that Isaiah predicts, and that John makes in today's readings. The tabernacle is the place where heaven and earth meet. God promises Abraham he would be a light to every nation, by restoring God's plan to have heaven – the place where God is – and earth – the place where humanity is – come together to overlap as one holy and eternal place.

Perhaps some of the most important lyrics in any hymn over the past 100 years or more, are from a song we would all agree is far from consideration for any hymnal. It's a song that hit number one on December 5, 1987, fittingly during Advent. That song of course, is Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven is a Place on Earth." Now before you get mad at me for using a song about

romance, to describe the larger relationship between God and humanity, remember that this is exactly what is being done in Hebrew Scripture with the 'Song of Songs.' But I won't break down that part of it. I'll stick to what's relevant for today.

What I want to point out is a bridge before the second chorus and the chorus itself. Carlisle sings, *'In this world we're just beginning to understand the miracle of living. Baby, I was afraid before, but I'm not afraid anymore. Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth? Ooh, heaven is a place on earth. They say in heaven love comes first. We'll make heaven a place on earth. Ooh, heaven is a place on earth.'*

These words from a former member of the Go-Gos turned soloist line up very well with the message that we see in Isaiah 61 and the opening of the gospel of John. Remember last week, we saw that the Gospel of Mark last week was encapsulating Isaiah 40-55, Now, this opening passage of John lines up with the last 10 chapters of Isaiah, chapters 56-66, namely the rise of a new Kingdom for Israel and all the nations, one that proclaims loyalty to God in the Suffering Servant.

And so, this passage from Isaiah shows that God is going to turn the world upside down, and through the servant, who is both God and also Israel, get vengeance, or vindication, by putting all things right, raising up the lowly and undoing all injustice. The Servant proclaims good news to the poor and the oppressed, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. He proclaims the Lord's favor, and also, as I said, God's vengeance or vindication. This is so that all who mourn will find comfort, wearing garland rather than ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise, instead of a faint spirit.

There's also more to parallel in the Christmas story, especially this image of trees and shoots. In Isaiah 6 the Messiah is called the 'Holy Seed' after a tree is cut down, and in Isaiah 11, he is referred to as the 'Shoot of Jesse.' Now the servants of the Suffering Servant are compared to seeds, oaks and shoots.

But I want to get back to the larger narrative that is at work, the bigger picture, namely that these promises pointed to in the earlier parts of Isaiah – that from the Seed and Shoot who is the Suffering Servant that is killed, and then miraculously alive again, would come a vision for a reconciled world. All of this is a hopeful pointing to the presence of God, among the people of God, to bring peace and joy, in a new creation centered on God's love.

The translation I gave you for John 1 is a very literal translation that unveils John's themes. He is drawing his Jewish readers' attention to the tabernacle in Exodus, and the description of Israel's census and the formation of Israel's camps. Now, I admit some of my colleagues might think I put too much on things like this, but I find it interesting that in the formation of the camp, the tabernacle is at the center of the encampment, putting God in the heart of the people. Now I realize this was for defensive purposes to have the tabernacle encircled, but there are

some who even think the camp was in the shape of a cross, again, with God's presence in the center.

But no matter how you look at it, the tabernacle – the place where God's presence dwelled – was to be at the center of the people, and so now I will take you back to John's gospel. In verse 1: *"In the beginning was the Word and the word was with God and the word was God."* And then in verse 14 – *"The Word became flesh and made His tabernacle among us."*

The verb most translations render as "dwelled" or "lived" has a larger meaning, in that it means literally to "pitch a tent" or "make a tabernacle." John is pointing to Jesus as the tabernacle, the place where the presence of God rested in the Exodus, and in the journey of the people to the promised land, and right on through to the reign of King David, before Solomon built a permanent temple, based on the tabernacle's plans.

This tabernacle was more than just a tent, it was the place where heaven and earth met. It was the place where God's presence was said to dwell among the Israelites, but unlike pagan temples in surrounding nations it had no image, because humans bear God's image.

And so, here is John using language from Genesis, with 'in the beginning,' Where God's Word brought light into creation, and he weaves that with the tabernacle, identifying Jesus, as One with God, as the Word of God that brought light, and in his humanity, or flesh, he is the tabernacle of God's presence.

Friends, John is pointing us to the Joy that we celebrate in the third week of Advent, namely, that the one true God did not anoint a mere human to reveal God's love, but that God came into the broken creation to share in our human existence. Indeed, in Jesus, God brought heaven and earth together, not in a limited way as God's people saw in the tabernacle and temple, but in a far greater way by sharing in our limited humanity, to live as we live and to die on the cross for us, taking on all of the world's sin on our behalf.

The incarnation, or the Word becoming embodied in Jesus, is a joyful moment. Indeed, even his brutal death at the hands of the world's greatest power, Rome, should be a source of joy for us because this was done for you and me, for all of us. What's more, this incarnation and death is not some temporary sacrifice, like the animal sacrifices done in the tabernacle and temple. No, it is the inauguration of a new creation, the sign of which, is the Resurrection of Jesus, not to die again, but to start the reconciliation of all things, putting all things the way they should be.

When we believe in this, our calling is to reveal this new creation in ourselves, to be like Jesus, revealing heaven here on earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, God demonstrated love by being born a human like us and going to the cross, and if we believe that He rose from the dead, then we are called to take part in God's work in this world. The work of telling others of God's new creation, being witnesses, to the light that has come into this dark world. We are

to give testimony to it like John the Baptist, by pointing to that light in our words, and also in our works, how we live, how we treat other people.

Indeed, this has been the charge of the church for nearly 2000 years, and still Christians, both those who have truly believed and those who have exploited the faith for worldly power, have too often ignored our calling to obey Jesus by our love for God and neighbor. But for those of us who believe and have been trying to do this, sometimes inadequately, but still trying, we trust that the life and death of Jesus brings with it a free gift we call grace. Our trying is a response to this gift. The forgiveness of our sins and the opportunity to repent, to turn again into the arms of our God who pursues us, with mercy and love, his presence and Spirit.

'In this world,' we might say, *'we are only beginning to understand the miracle of living.'* Indeed, the miracle that is the God who is not like any other god, then or now, who chose to live as we do, and endured the worst that this world had to offer. This was not because this God needs us in some way to exploit us, but because this God loves us, loves what He has created. God desires for us to be together now and eternally.

Carlisle sings, *'I was afraid before, but I'm not afraid anymore.'* Friends, we need not fear what we might lose, by living into our calling. We can love God and one another without fear, because Jesus has won. He defeated sin and death, when He died on the cross in our place, and by His life, He revealed for us what it means to be truly human.

'Ooh, baby, do you know what that's worth?' Yes, it means, *'heaven is a place on earth.'* Right here and right now, God is reconciling all things in Jesus and asks us to join in, not so we can die and escape this world off to heaven, but so that we can transform this world, leave it a better place than it was when we started. And when we rise again in the new creation, we will see the glorious city of that God has assembled with our contributions to it.

'They say in heaven love comes first,' Carlisle goes on, *'We'll make heaven a place on earth.'* Friends, in these troubled times, we have a responsibility to bring joy to the world, not by ignoring suffering in the hope of escaping, but by revealing God's love, through us in our words and deeds right here, right now. When we do that, we find out we have a purpose. There is a meaning to this life. It is not just you live, and you die and that's all there is.

We have a calling. We have something to do while we are here. I don't know about you, but that brings me joy. I hope that it brings you joy too, knowing that God loves you, knows you and has a plan for you. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)

words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

John 1:1-18 (Pastor's Translation) In the ***beginning*** was the Word, and the ***Word*** was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. Though Him, all things came into being, and without Him, not even one ***thing*** has come into being. In Him was life and the ***life*** was the light of ***humanity***. And the light shines in the ***darkness***, and darkness cannot ***overcome*** it. There came a man having been sent by God. His name was ***John***. He came as a witness, in ***order*** that he might ***testify*** through the ***light***, so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but that he might ***witness*** through the light. The ***true*** light, which shines on every ***person***, was ***coming*** into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through Him, and the ***world*** did not know Him. He came to what was his own and his own did not ***receive*** him. However, as many who received Him, He gave to them ***authority*** to be ***children*** of God, those ***believing*** in His name, who not of ***blood***, nor the will of flesh, nor the will of ***man***, but of God were ***born***. And the Word became ***flesh*** and made His ***tabernacle*** among us, and we ***beheld*** His glory, a ***glory*** as of an only ***begotten*** from the Father, ***full*** of grace and truth. John witnesses through Him and he cried out saying, "This is He of whom I was saying, "The One coming after me, takes ***precedence*** over me because He existed before me." For from out of the fullness of Him that we all have received ***grace*** upon grace. For the ***law***, on ***account*** of Moses was given. Grace and ***truth*** came on account of ***Jesus*** the ***anointed King***. No one has ever stared at ***God*** at any time. The only begotten God, the One being in the bosom of the ***Father***, that is who has ***made*** Him known.