

Imagine Love
Isaiah 35:1-10 (CEB)
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Stevie Wonder's Christmas song "Someday at Christmas" envisions a world without hunger, war, and violence but filled with peace, freedom, equality, and hope. A world where hate will be gone and love will prevail. He dreams of a world where everyone flourishes, "maybe not in time for you and me but someday at Christmastime." We can certainly dream of that brighter, better future. The prophet Isaiah would tell us those dreams are a possibility and are waiting to be a reality.

As you heard the reading of our scripture passage from Isaiah today, you might have been thinking to yourself, "what does any of that have to do with love?" And you would not be alone in that, for I thought the exact same thing when I read it last week. It is easy to identify joy in this passage, which makes sense because it is the lectionary text for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, which was last week, when we focused on joy. But stay with me here. I think God is showing us something about love that is not obvious on the surface.

The prophet Isaiah prophesied in Jerusalem, landing him within the southern kingdom of Judah. Scholars are divided over the timing of when Isaiah 35 was written. Some believe it was written during the time of exile, which feels appropriate given the hopeful promise of restoration. Others assert it was written post-exile, after everyone had returned to Jerusalem. While the dating is not clear, it is clearly about the time of exile. The vision of a transformation of the desert into a lush land of blossoming flowers is a metaphor for the grand restoration of the people of Israel. It is a visionary future of transformed land and saved people. Hear the beautiful poetry once again: "The desert and the dry land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom like the crocus. They will burst into bloom, and rejoice with joy and singing." Skipping ahead, "Waters will spring up in the desert, and streams in the wilderness. The burning sand will become a pool, and the thirsty ground, fountains of water." God will bring about transformation. God's splendor and glory will be revealed.

The visions of water in the desert and streams of the wilderness echo God's care for the Israelites as they journeyed through the wilderness. Exodus 17 tells of the miraculous provision of water that flowed from a rock when the Israelites were thirsty. These verses here in Isaiah 35 would have been a reminder of God's care and provision. These words would have been a soothing balm to those in exile. "Strengthen the weak hands, and support the unsteady knees. Say to those who are panicking: "Be strong! Don't fear! Here's your God, coming with vengeance; with divine retribution God will come to save you." This was an assurance that the time of suffering and exile would not last forever, that God was already on God's way to save them. This was good news of God's care for the people of God. God would bring redemption, spiritually, economically, and politically. God will transform and restore all things.

And yet, we acknowledge that this transformation and restoration has not been completely fulfilled. Much suffering still exists in the world. We still long for what will be and has yet to come. The end of sighing and sorrow has not yet come but we hope for it in the world to come, when God makes all things new and Christ returns in final victory. However, we take hope in the revelation of God's care and compassion for God's people, this good news that has the power to transform ordinary lives and the realities of the world.

When I consider this passage, what really stands out to me is this image of flourishing: the wilderness and the desert blooming with flowers and filled with flowing streams of water. It makes for a beautiful mental picture. The brilliant colors of the crocus, the sparkling streams. It evokes a sense of wholeness. The Hebrew word that captures this concept is *shalom*. The root word of *shalom* is *shalam*. *Shalam* is recorded all throughout the Hebrew bible but is used in Exodus 21 and 22 when Moses is giving instructions to the people about what to do in the theft of property or when someone/something causes material loss. When that happens, the owner is considered incomplete, and it is up to the responsible party to make it right. In the translation of Exodus 21 and 22, *shalam* is translated as "make it good" or "restore." It was to make something whole again. This meaning of wholeness is carried over into the word *shalom*. We often translate this word into "peace" in English but it means so much more than that. "The Bible describes [shalom] as relationships restored and reconciled; people experiencing well-being, justice, and abundant flourishing; and God, people, and all of the creation interconnected in beautiful harmony."¹ Abundant flourishing.

Osheta Moore, pastor, speaker, and author of "Dear White Peacemakers" describes shalom as "God's dream for the world as it should be: whole, vibrant, flourishing, unified, and yes, at peace. Shalom is God's dream for his love to bring wholeness and goodness to the world and everything within it, including you and me."² Even though time and time again this shalom was and is broken, God promised a covenant of shalom, a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ in his inauguration of the kingdom of God. Since the beginning God has continually worked for shalom and we have the ongoing invitation "to follow God toward and into this vision of wholeness, justice, and right-relatedness to God's self, one another, and the creation around us."³

So how do we live out this vision of shalom? By loving God and loving our neighbor. I told you I would eventually get to love! In an interview at Biola University Nicholas Wolterstorff, retired Professor of Philosophical Theology at Yale University, referenced the greatest commandment (love God and love your neighbor as yourself) in connection to shalom flourishing. The Greek word *agape* that we translate as love has more nuance to it than the English word love. Wolterstorff believes that *agape* love is more akin to care, not only in feeling

¹ <https://www.peacecatalyst.org/shalom>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

but in action. If the goal is shalom, then we must interact with others in such a way that the flourishing of them and the community is enhanced.

Love leads to flourishing. The care shown to others, whether a fellow human being or any other part of creation, is an expression of God's love. I have this image of someone carefully tending to a house plant, watering it at exactly the right time and making sure it gets enough sunlight. I am not that someone, however. You can ask my husband or any plant that has died on my watch. While this is a simple visualization, showing love to others makes a huge impact.

Dr. Daniel Siegel, child psychiatrist, professor, and author, shared about the importance of love on a child's developing brain in a series from UNICEF called "The Science of Love in Childhood."⁴ Dr. Siegel considers love to be the vital source of life and the essence that helps a child grow and thrive. As parents or caregivers, the way that we connect with our children affects how they grow and develop. Relationships that allow children to thrive allow their brain to integrate and properly regulate. The number one brain factor for well-being is how interconnected the brain network is, meaning how well your brain communicates with itself. The better connected and communication, the more integrated the brain is. Children that do not experience love through secure attachments (such as in the case of abuse, neglect, and so forth) end up with poor development of brain integration. The brain becomes anatomically and functionally impaired. As a result, they are not able to regulate themselves and as they grow up into adulthood and will often respond in negative ways to both internal and external stressors. However, the love of a single individual (whether a teacher, other relative, neighbor, etc.) in these particular children's lives can improve their outcomes. The love that we give children results in the integration of the whole body system, which gives them resilience. When children have love in their relationships, when they are safe, seen, soothed, and secure, this harnesses neuroplasticity that makes them better prepared to deal with the world. Love allows them to flourish.

On the final night of his life, Jesus was with his disciples in an upper room. The Gospel of John includes the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet, an act of love and service. Shortly after, he announced that he would be betrayed by one of them, Judas. And yet, in the midst of all this, he offers them a new commandment: "Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other." (John 13:34-35) We are not only called but commanded to love one another. While this is directly referencing loving each other in the body of Christ, we know that this love is not meant to be kept to ourselves. We must embody the love of God as we journey through life, sharing it with everyone. This love is not our own but comes from the very heart of God.

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/stories/science-of-love-in-childhood>

We embody God's love through authentic, wholehearted, servant-love towards others. It is giving of yourself for the wellbeing of someone else. It is identifying and meeting the needs of those around you. It is taking good care of God's creation, knowing that all of creation is a gift. John Pavlovitz, Christian pastor and author, wrote on his blog "As a Christian, Love is the only acceptable legacy I care to leave the world; not Love covered in doctrine, not Love couched in religion, not Love loaded down with caveats and conditions; just the beautifully potent thing itself, distilled down to its essence and delivered directly to people as honestly and purely as I can. And let's not kid ourselves, most people know when they're really being loved and when they been handed a lousy imitation with the same name—especially when it comes to religious people. I've come to believe that if someone's color, gender, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation keeps you from fully loving them, you're probably doing Love wrong."⁵ Love must be authentic.

Imagine embodying the love of God so that it leads to the flourishing of someone or something else. It looks like making the hungry less hungry, the thirsty less thirsty, the lonely less lonely, the hurting less hurt, the forgotten less forgotten. We can step into people's lives and meet tangible, physical needs, but we can also be a presence that listens and seeks to learn. It can be a word of encouragement or support, a reminder that they are loved and not alone. God is not asking us to make grand, sweeping gestures of love, but to remain so connected to God that we do not miss the opportunities to be the presence and love of God to those around us. We embody God's love, knowing how deeply loved we are and wanting nothing more that to share that love with others.

Imagine how different the world would look if we embodied the love of God. Imagine people knowing their inherit worth, dignity, and value because they are made in the image of God. Imagine people knowing that they matter to God and others. Imagine the homes, neighborhoods, and cities that transform into places of safety and security. Imagine overturning the systems that seek to keep people marginalized and oppressed. Imagine clean water, the care and protection of animals, and forests bursting with trees and plant life. Imagine crocuses blooming in the desert. Imagine streams flowing through the wilderness. Imagine the flourishing of all creation. Imagine love.

⁵ http://johnpavlovitz.com/2015/09/18/i-want-to-do-love-right/?utm_campaign=coschedule&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=johnpavlovitz