Delight in Our Wholeness Together

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Text: Isaiah 62:1-5

62:1 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.

62:2 The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

62:3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

62:4 You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.

62:5 For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.

John 2:1-11

2:1 On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

2:2 Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

2:3 When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine."

2:4 And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come."

2:5 His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

2:6 Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons.

2:7 Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim.

2:8 He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it.

2:9 When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom

2:10 and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now."

2:11 Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Welcome back! This is an honor.

This is a sermon I adapted from my “Masterpredigt”, my master sermon, that I prepared and delivered to the Reutlingen School of Theology in mid-January. So I try to include a few bits of German here and there, and have modified it some for the season and current events. It is based on the readings from Jan. 16, but I have incorporated this week’s Psalm and Epistle selections, which seemed too relevant to ignore.

Thank you for this opportunity and honor, I hope you it brings you life and a deeper connection to God and each other.

Opening Blessing:

Liebe Gemeinde, dear community, we gather today in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am grateful and in holy awe of the Divine Feminine energy. Our creeds and traditions do not adequately give respect to this force of all life on earth, the nurturing womb within which Jesus and all humanity is crafted daily, at whose breast he suckled. That force which is inextricably part of God, which holds the universe in balance between God’s powers of destruction and creation, and which cannot be split from our reality or God’s.

Sermon:

Did the second part of my opening catch you off guard, mentioning the Divine Feminine right off the bat? Please sit with that feeling. We are going to explore it as it relates to the texts we just read. It is OK to wrestle with God, as Jacob/Israel knows. Indeed, it is a blessing. I pray that I bring a good and faithful word to you today, that honors YHWH and this sacred time. Thank you for you grace and attention.

The major themes that emerge from the selected texts of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) are marriage and its delight. In the Isaiah passage, like much of Isaiah, there is use of metaphor to help the Jewish people understand their struggle through this time of change, and to remain faithful to God. Marriage in the John passage is the scene of Jesus’ first miracle, when he turns water into wine. In both passages women play critical roles, the text hinges on their action and its purpose.

 You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you. -Isaiah 62:4-5

For (third) Isaiah, Jerusalem, Zion, Israel, the People of God, The Länd — all Creation, represent the bride of God. By faith we shall be wedded to God and God will delight in us. The Psalm selection, 36:5-10 reminds us that we will delight in God, too. “O continue your steadfast love to those who know you, and your salvation to the upright of heart!” Let’s look more closely at the word, יָשִׂ֤ישׂ “yā·śîś“ in verse five meaning “to rejoice”, “to delight”, or “take pleasure in.” “Rejoice” is very common throughout The Bible, LearntheBible.org finds 160 verses. But “yā·śîś“ is only used four times. Perhaps another meaning is being conveyed here, subtly and with nuance based on word attachment as Hebrew does. The pairing with the noun וּמְשׂ֤וֹשׂ “ū·mə·śō·wś” of the groom rejoicing indicates the pleasure of the marriage union and its consummation, the delight of creation. At this moment certainly there is pleasure for the lovers, but there is also new life, new possibility. This double “yes” in Hebrew is more than the sum of its parts. Player three has entered the game.

The Biblical authors avoid what would be considered lewdness, but this subtle erotic imagery helps us understand the depth of our relationship with God. Does that make you uncomfortable, too? Well stay away from Song of Solomon!

If that does make you uncomfortable, wrestle with that, too. Should sex make us squirm? After all it’s where we all came from. God gave it to us as a gift and it is a beautiful thing. Didn’t you notice? Stand up Nathan, take a bow!

In order for this metaphor to make sense theologically, we must understand the truth on both sides of the duality presented, YHWH and Zion. We know that Zion or the community of believers, or any conception of life and creation at all isn’t all female. It is a balance. In a like manner, the male and female must also be balanced within the nature of God. This balance is throughout the universe at every level. Physicists call it supersymmetry. Particles and antiparticles, protons and electrons, the symmetry of our bodies, the sun and moon, night and day, winter and summer.

Kabbalist interpretations of these realities and metaphors for God show us that spiritual development must inevitably lead us to awe in the face of an ineffable, Supreme God beyond rationality and beyond a single gender. This is what is meant by the “crown of glory” עֲטֶ֥רֶת תִּפְאֶ֖רֶת “‘ă·ṭe·reṯ tip̄·’e·reṯ“ from verse three. To “wear it,” both sides of our body, representing the duality of the cosmos, must join together in a unified band of enlightened knowledge of YHWH, which glorifies the godhead and worshipper both. The crown represents this achievement and its priceless value, and is possibly the source of later halo depictions of the beautified or enlightened ones seen in Christian art. In the Kabbalist “Sefirot” or hierarchy of spiritual dimensions, the crown כתר “keter,” sits atop, and its numerical value of 620 represent the 620 “pillars of light” or the “full number of God’s commandments to Israel.” Note that the numerical value of “yā·śîś“, the unusual word for “rejoice in delight,” is also 620.

In order to reflect the fullness of the *imago dei* within us, we must nurture the fullness of our mental, spiritual, and emotional being to reflect the wholeness of God that is beyond either/ors, omnipresent. For me, the male part is easy, it comes naturally and is rewarded by a patriarchal society. It is the female part within myself that I must cultivate, so that I can understand God the Mother, the sustainer, the life giver. This is challenging for me and it is meant to be so. God is worth the struggle. In many Native American cultures, “two-spirit” people who identified across genders in some mysterious way were seen to have an advantage in the spiritual life, as if they were closer to understanding God’s nature, even though it made it harder for them to relate to the common experience. Getting married and having kids isn’t for everyone, but learning to love God and neighbor more fully is.

Another key word from verse one is וִישׁוּעָתָ֖הּ “wî·šū·‘ā·ṯāh” (“yeshuah-tah”), which includes the word יְשׁוּעָ֑ה “yə·šū·‘āh” meaning “salvation.” Now where have I heard that word before, “yeshuah?” Ah, yes, Jesus. His Hebrew name means “salvation.” So this incarnation of “God with us”, Emmanuel, Jesus, is a product of God’s delight and a gift of grace and mercy to the world. If Jesus is God’s son, who is the mother? Mary is his earthly mother. Blessed and saintly as she is, she is not a female equivalent for YHWH. It is either within God’s self to be both halves of the pairing, or, if the Trinity the begets the son, and you want to assign the femininity of God to the Holy Spirit I’m game, but it has to be in there somewhere! Note that in Hebrew “YHWH” is gender neutral.

Jesus’ first miracle is about a son coming into his own. His mother quietly points out that the wine has run out, thereby halting the celebration, and he responds that his “time has not yet come.” But wise as mothers are, even Jesus’, she seems to know better and he seems to agree that perhaps indeed it had come after all, for he performs his first miracle. Although the host and presumably the guests are unaware and were merely grateful to the family for saving the “good wine” — I bet it was really good! — the servants and disciples knew what miracle had been performed, “reveal[ing] his glory,” and believed in him.

A primary concern of feminist theologians is whether the male savior is able to truly understand and therefore fully redeem the women who believe in him. Speaking of the Divine Mother of Jesus, where is the daughter of God? A deeper reflection on the theological problem of the maleness of Christ is the matter for another sermon — or heaps of books. But let’s remember how Jesus behaved with relation to women. Non-traditional, shocking, radically inclusive. When he speaks to the Samaritan women at the well, he breaks down several barriers between Jews and Samaritans, between men and women, between classes. At that time of day, it would have only been appropriate for women to gather at the well. Meaning, Jesus moved into the role of a woman in that moment, and like the life-giving waters of the woman’s womb, offered her a drink of the water of life everlasting.

There are many other examples. The impoverished widow at the temple bears far greater righteousness than the rich men who flaunt their wealth and their big money offerings. He refuses to condemn the adulteress and defends her brilliantly by exposing the male mob’s own sin and unworthiness to judge her. The one time Jesus is corrected is by the Syro-Phoenecian women, who demeans herself as a dog in order to expose Jesus’ superiority complex, and he agrees, wisely outsmarted, and heals her daughter. And although it is barely mentioned, it was the women disciples of Christ who never abandoned him when all the men did, and it was they who were the first witnesses of his resurrection at the Garden tomb. Mother Mary was by side his entire life.

Is this a “feminist” sermon? I don’t know, but I am trying to think of God past the beard in my own reflection and the heavy baggage of the male dominant Church. When I see the problems that face the world: violence, unsustainable economic systems, huge wealth disparities, environmental destruction — it seems we are caught up in the lust for power driven chiefly by males both in positions of leadership today and in historical philosophies driven by dominance. The headlines are all too clear.

Do not think I am divinizing Angela Merkel, or any other successful and powerful woman. Rather, I am feminizing God. When I think of the term “The Future is Female” I get excited. Men are not now going to be subjected and oppressed in a reversal of what has happened to women over human history. No, when I consider “The Future is Female” I think of young women like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg, who are persistently leading us to a more compassionate reality. They want everyone to thrive and survive, they envision a healthier, happier, and safer world. And out of the strength of this love and conviction, they are willing to put everything on the line, to risk their lives. Isn’t this what Christ means when he says “take up thy cross”?

Speaking of the world beyond our shores, it wouldn’t feel right to ignore the war and crisis that is currently happening in Ukraine. And the lectionary for this week seems as if it was written for the matter. Let’s hear it, too.

Psalm 27)

27:1 The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

27:2 When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh-- my adversaries and foes-- they shall stumble and fall.

27:3 Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

27:4 One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

27:5 For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

27:6 Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

27:7 Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

27:8 “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek.

27:9 Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

27:10 If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

27:11 Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

27:12 Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

27:13 I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

27:14 Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

Epistle) Philippians 3:17-4:1

3:17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.

3:18 For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.

3:19 Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.

3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

3:21 He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Jesus is with those fleeing for their lives. Jesus hears the prayers of the people who trust in him. Jesus is the mother in labor in the basement and the old man worried about not getting his medications. Was there in the frozen trenches in the years-long war of attrition on the eastern front before the big invasion. Jesus is there with the soldiers on both sides. Jesus is knocking on the door of Putin’s heart. Jesus is trying to find a way to help God’s people live.

Theologian Mary Grey speaks to Jesus’ role as salvific Divine descendant in the process of healing the world and embracing its wholeness beyond self:

“If the relational process is at the heart of the reality of the great divine creative-redemptive dynamism, participating in this must be what is meant by holiness. So entering into deeper more meaningful and at the same time juster [sic] structures of relating is the kind of redemptive spirituality needed for the transformation of the world.”

In this time of Lent, we honor the sacrifice of Christ, incarnated into the flesh so that the most holy might know the human experience. We will see by his example, a way of being human that brings the most out of everyone, that sees the gifts in us all, different as they are, and loves them each and every one passionately. Incarnation, salvation, liberation. The relationship between God and Creation, self and the Divine, the other as Christ beloved–embracing it, discovering it within and without, delighting in it.

Closing prayer:

Jehovah, Adonai, Yeshua, Elohim, El-Shaddai, Ehyeh, you of many names and forms. Show us your light. Show us so that we may see through the darkness, and that we may break through it to the dawn, to see your rainbow of beautiful creation, that which you showed Noah as a promise of your love, your “everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.” We do not live without you. We worship you Creator. We give thanks and turn our faces to your glory that we may live into it by your mercy, and walk the good road.