Though I come from a long line of people who loved all things related to plants, who could grow amazing and beautiful gardens filled with azaleas, roses, honeysuckle, magnolia, elephant’s ears, and all things that sing of Southern plant life, I am not a gardener. My knowledge about how to grow and nurture plants is limited at best. Even I know, though, that green things do not grow from dead things!

In the previous chapter God spoke through the prophet Isaiah of the impending destruction that awaited the people of God, “The glory of his forest and his fruitful land the Lord will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when an invalid wastes away. The remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child can write them down.”¹ Now in this first verse God says, “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.”² Life out of death – that is our story.

Prophets are not known for being gentle with their words and actions. They tend to verbalize what no one wants to hear. They draw attention to that which no one wants to see. They shape the reality of inconvenient and uncomfortable truth and place it front and center where it cannot be ignored. And in that harsh present, they are not beloved at all. As much as we read the prophets and assent to their forthright honesty sprinkled with wisdom and hope, we would not appreciate it at all if a prophet stood here talking about us in that same way. Yet that was exactly the role Isaiah played in the waning years of the nation Judah as it spiraled downward. Judah was trying to match the growth of imperialism with responses of more violence, amassing wealth at the expense of the poor and vulnerable, building walls of isolation and not welcoming outsiders. Everything Judah was doing flew in the face of the kind of people God had created them to be. In the chapter just prior to today’s reading God’s displeasure was quite obvious:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,  
who write oppressive statutes,  
to turn aside the needy from justice  
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,

¹ Isaiah 10: 18-19 NRSV  
² Isaiah 11: 1 NRSV
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!
What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the calamity that will come from far away?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth?³

As far as the people of Judah were concerned, life was good. Yes, there were uncertainties, but they paled in comparison to their booming economy, growing stockpile of defense, and mighty kings. No wonder they thought Isaiah was bothersome and a threat! Even today that is not exactly the kind of message we want to hear just before Christmas. And this is even the Sunday we lit the Advent Candle of love!

It would be some time after the writing of this part of Isaiah before Judah actually fell – a bit over 100 years. Isaiah’s words of warning would continue through his successors – the others who contributed to the book we know as Isaiah as well as Micah, Nahum, Jeremiah, and others. Judah fell, the people scattered, and it seemed the Word of God went dark. That is, until Jesus of Nazareth arrived, reminding the people who they were to be as God’s beloved creation. His radical message centered, not on earthly power or kingdoms, not on wealth or property, not on status or reputation, but on loving relationships with God, with one another, with the world, even within ourselves. It was not what anyone expected. After all, they had based their value on the nation, on their wealth, on the number of ‘worthy’ people. And all along God had other plans. They had been counting the rings on a large oak, and God was looking at a straggly root coming out of a dead piece of wood and calling it glorious.

It is challenging to be where we are today – not just in this congregation but in church all around the world. Our previous standards don’t hold up well in the light of the Gospel of the Messiah of whom Isaiah spoke. So often we look to size, numbers, programs in order to evaluate our ‘success’. We are not alone as we all struggle for survival in a culture that clearly has values other than the ones of which Jesus spoke. Of all the commandments that Jesus said, the one most often repeated is centered in love.

³ Isaiah 10: 1-3 NRSV
“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”⁴ A commandment repeated thirteen times in the New Testament. Building on the oldest commandment in Judaism Jesus also said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”⁵ Commandments that were told over and over again throughout the New Testament. Love. Nothing about attendance, buildings, or cash, but everything about relationships based on love. That is the heart and soul of the Gospel, the heart and soul of who we are to be as people of God.

What is love? That emotion that makes your heart beat with excitement when you look into the eyes of your life partner? That feeling you get when you hold your sleeping child or grandchild? In part, in part. In Shakespeare’s play Juliet spoke of her all-consuming feelings for Romeo,

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.⁶

That kind of love is breath-taking, it makes us smile with awe. But for God, for the Messiah who Isaiah envisioned, for Jesus, for his earliest followers, love looked much different than that. It is not always glamorous and exhilarating, sometimes it is hard work, other times it is messy and complicated. It is a love that reaches out and lifts up the ones the world shuns and puts aside – the poor, widows, children, foreigners, those without power. It is a reaching in and grounding one’s life in an intimate knowledge of God. The Hebrew word for ‘know’ is fascinating, because it extends far beyond head knowledge of facts. This knowledge strips us of all pretense and exposes our true selves, unites hearts, creates community and unity, plunges deep into one’s being, and shapes us in the very image of God.

In his book The Fire Next Time author and activist James Baldwin wrote:

⁴ John 13: 34-35 NRSV
⁵ Matthew 22: 37-40 NRSV
Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word "love" here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace - not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.7 Love always takes us beyond ourselves. It does strip off all the artificial masks we create for ourselves, plunges us into depths of honesty, and then frees us and others to become the people God created us to be. A church, one patterned after God’s own heart, is one that lives for others, one in which people are connected through honest and authentic relationship. It is one that does not focus on mere survival but on unexpected and surprising growth that defies the world. It reflects a love that looks, not like the mighty cedars of Lebanon, but like a young leafy shoot coming out of a dead piece of wood.

The letter of I John was one of the last written in the New Testament, over six hundred years after the time of Isaiah. It echoes the words of the prophet, that love is to be lived:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth….8

Love always moves beyond the words, echoes God’s own truth, and becomes action in relationship. The question for us as a community of faith, for the greater Church, is how to discern love in action. For that we need to step away from the demands of the constructs built by culture to listen to God, to look to what is actually in the Scriptures, to learn a radical love that looks different from what we expect.

It is quite clear in the Scriptures and especially in the life and ministry of Jesus that we are called to love, but it is a special kind of love that focuses on the outsiders, the ones the world forgets, the ones who are often powerless in the face of abusive systems. That looks quite different from a church that is centered on appealing to the masses with slick promotions and multiple programs and frets over not being what people ‘want’. It is quite different from a church that boasts of its numbers, its building, its budget and stresses when those artificial standards are not enough. A community of faith based on

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8 1 John 4: 16-19a NRSV
God’s love is one who looks to the needs of others, who becomes involved in the lives of the community, who welcomes freely and openly the ones no one else wants, the ones who will in no way benefit them. A community of faith based on God’s love is one who dares to voice opposition to the powers that tell us it’s okay to shut our borders, it’s okay to cut back on programs that feed and house the vulnerable, it’s okay for the rich to amass wealth while the poor are relegated to hard lives of scraping for survival, it’s okay that our political system has sold out to the highest bidder, it’s okay to shrug our shoulders at yet another shooting. It’s okay to yell at one another, to call one another names, to demonize others. Well, it’s not okay. None of it is okay. If we as a community of faith, as part of the Body of Christ, stand by in silent complicity, then we have no clue what God’s love looks like and we have missed the entire message God sent the world in Jesus of Nazareth.

This season of Advent is a part of the journey of faith. It calls us to look inward, to re-orient ourselves in the story of God and God’s love, to find the courage for the next steps. As we move closer to Christmas, as we recall the prophecies, as we hear the so-familiar Christmas story, listen with ears filtered through God’s own love. It is startling when we do so – when we recognize that the entire story of the birth of Jesus was one of outsiders, of opposition to a corrupt political system, of a radical love that defied convention, of learning an altogether new way of life. The love God sent into the world through the baby Jesus was not meant solely for us. It was not a love to save us personally or make us feel good about ourselves. It is a love that was given to transform the world. Our question now – how will we love?