

## 2.12.23 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

### “God’s Love”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

#### **Isaiah 49:22-23, 26b (NIV)**

<sup>22</sup> This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

“See, I will beckon to the nations,

I will lift up my banner to the peoples;  
they will bring your sons in their arms  
and carry your daughters on their hips.

<sup>23</sup> Kings will be your foster fathers,  
and their queens your nursing mothers.

They will bow down before you with their faces to the ground;  
they will lick the dust at your feet.

Then you will know that I am the Lord;  
those who hope in me will not be disappointed.”

<sup>26</sup> . . . Then all mankind will know  
that I, the Lord, am your Savior,  
your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.”

**Leader: These are Words of God’s Prophecy. All:** Thanks be to God!

#### **Colossians 3:12-17 (CEV)**

<sup>12</sup> God loves you and has chosen you as his own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek, and patient. <sup>13</sup> Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. <sup>14</sup> Love is more important than anything else. It is what ties everything completely together.

<sup>15</sup> Each one of you is part of the body of Christ, and you were chosen to live together in peace. So let the peace that comes from Christ control your thoughts. And be grateful. <sup>16</sup> Let the message about Christ completely fill your lives, while you use all your wisdom to teach and instruct each other. With thankful hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. <sup>17</sup> Whatever you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks to God the Father because of him.

**Leader: These are Words of God’s Love. All:** Thanks be to God!

#### **Please pray with me:**

Oh God, we thank you for our worship so far today. We love to gather every Sunday and other times during the week. Help us to focus on today’s Scriptures in the context of our 2023 theme, knowing that in all endeavors both personally and for the church, you love us as we strive to be closer to you and to do your will in this world. Walk with us Lord, as we walk the path you have called us to. Be with those who cannot be here today, and please speak through me today. Amen.

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Happy early Valentine’s Day! I hope you have something special planned, and if you do not, please join us for lunch on Tuesday at

Anthony's at noon at the restaurant. Nothing fancy, just good fellowship together. And as you know we'll welcome Hazel Ball's family here Thursday morning, at 10 am for her funeral service and time with family.

Let's move into our prophecy first to get both a glimpse at the past and the future of Israel. No, this is not about my trip, yet as I read Isaiah, the words hit me differently. The prophet states that the Gentiles and Israelites will collaborate and help one another in deference to the Lord. Israel's enemies will be destroyed, causing the world to pay attention to God as Redeemer. The context is a people in deep distress who are waiting for God's intervention; he will free them from captivity and bondage. Is he speaking in the past or for the future? Yes.

Remember, this is prophecy, not an accurate history. Earlier passages dealt with the Jews' Babylonian captivity. He refers to the generational redemption of the Hebrew people, yes, who had been captured and exiled. But he is also reminding them in their anguish that they will be restored to their holy city of Jerusalem which will also be restored both soon and in the distant future when the Messiah comes. He's saying, "Just wait!" God's love will be revealed no matter the risk or discouragement.

Did you know that Colossae (our second reading) was in Turkey, not too far from the earthquake area? We have all been praying for the earthquake situation in that same region of Turkey and Syria. Turkey is 99.8% Muslim, yet countries of Jews, Christians, and no religion have sent help that keeps pouring in. We have a united care of humanity in times of natural disaster – Israel and Gentiles alike – Isaiah says. Might this Isaiah prophecy about God's restoring love speak to the families and

emergency responders for over 28,000 people lost? It is not quid-pro-quo, if you love me I will save you, but the prophet **is** speaking to God's chosen people: God will restore you and your cities because I have always loved you and been in covenant with you (Moses, Abraham, Noah, David, Jesus). It is truly worth pondering.

These words of Isaiah are helpful for the church universal in our times as well. Numbers are not as important as the intention of our beliefs and response to Christ's commandment to introduce the Messiah to others. Based on our church's trajectory from "Holy Interruptions" in 2019 with the passing of the Senior Minister's baton; to the 2020's theme of "Being Sustained..." which took us through the pandemic both personally and as a church; to 2021's "Dream Dreams" for the community and church, trusting God's vision more than our own; to last year's theme of "Listen for the Work" while we opened to hearing God's direction and call; to this year's "Divine Experiments," we **are** growing in thought, heart, mind, soul, and deed. Risk, success, and failure will be components of this year's growth. We must get comfortable with all three, like the exiles, doing what they always did, staying close to God's will, yet adapting somewhat to the culture around them, knowing full well that we are God's people. God loves us as he did them; God redeems us as he did the Israelites when he returned them to Jerusalem for restoration. So why worry?

Resilience and innovation require flexibility. Success requires some failure. Winston Churchill said: "Success is moving from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm!" Some of our experiments in discipleship or evangelism may not yield outstanding results, yet the results we achieve

will help to grow us in wisdom, knowledge, and spirituality. So, we must keep our hearts and minds aligned with God's purpose as Paul preaches to the Colossians. Because Creator God loves us unconditionally, he's "got our back" and wants us to succeed. How we do that is through commitment, intentional risk, and some natural failure. **But** God's love abounds, and his love matters not just for ourselves in the church and mission center to make **us** feel good, but his love matters for those separated from him, either by apathy or by choice. It is one of our mandates to help reunite those separated souls with Jesus, and to introduce Jesus to some who never knew him at all.

That is one of Paul's evangelistic messages for us too. We are sometimes thrown together in church activities with people different from ourselves, yet we are the body of Christ! Everything we do must yield to Christ's leadership in our lives, and that includes church life and relationships, those now and those to come. Paul calls the Colossians to perfect unity, characterizing peace and gratitude, doing all in the name of the Lord Jesus ("17 Whatever you say or do should be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, as you give thanks to God the Father because of him (Col 3:17 <sup>CEV</sup>).") We must do this through mercy, charity, generosity, worship, acts of kindness, forgiveness, and humility. When a new idea comes up, please be open to it, especially if it wasn't yours. We Baptists support priesthood of all believers and trust one another in this body. Out of our divine surrender and our unity may come experiments that do not grow the church immediately but **will grow us**. That is all I ask of you; commitment to the Lord's will, peace, and gratitude among us as a congregation, and open, hospitable hearts toward others.

Christ's mercies are available to all who trust him; we have seen that over the years of our church lives. Sometimes disagreements or conflict rise up, but God's love prevails. You may be asking what kind of divine experiments are you thinking about? I have three revealed so far but am hoping you will share more ideas. We will implement some things we tested last year, so that will be easier to accomplish, like Good Friday lunch and service and Adult Vacation Bible School. Those are for certain. The first new one will deal with our already established small groups that gather and pastoral care, following structures some churches are now using. I'll share more with you in the weeks to come, so be praying about our church's pastoral care processes.

Please trust that all experiments will utilize our spiritual gifts that we spent some time studying and will follow Paul's model today (go back and re-read the passage all week). They will use the giftings that are unique to our members, such as hospitality, shepherding, and generosity. Keep listening for God's direction, because remember, this is not a company with a CEO that dictates every step. We are a congregation who decides together through prayer and discernment innovating and utilizing our teams who have strong leadership. I am indeed your pastoral shepherd but am also an apostle and evangelist; and you called me to this task. So let us be enthusiastic about the future! God will restore and redeem our future as he will in paradise. Amen. //

**Will you pray with me?** God, creator of all, help us to remember we are yours and that you love us unconditionally "warts and all". Please strengthen our resolve to listen to what you direct us to do and to continue to discern which activities honor you and will grow your kingdom. Bring

transformation into ourselves and our church and community, as we explore what “divine experiments” will come and what inspiration surfaces. Also, Lord, be with us as we steward your church business in the next meeting. In Jesus’ name, we pray, **Amen.**