

“Whose line is it anyway?”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Isaiah 42:1-12
December 16, 2018
Third Sunday of Advent

*'Twas the day before Sunday, and all through our house,
Not a human was stirring, and neither were the three cats.
We sat by the Christmas tree, both laughing and weeping,
Mr. Pickles, Tulip, and Cleo worked hard on their sleeping.*

We were opening Christmas cards and letters, which is so much more fun than actually preparing and mailing out your own. We were in the middle of being properly amazed at the growth of human children and impressed with the beautiful cards selected and delighted by the fun things our friends have done this past year, when I realized there were two more envelopes unopened.

The first was from the Smithsons. If you've heard the memorable story of me and Amber departing our wedding in a canoe, and all the folks running out onto the dock to wish us well and throw birdseed, and the dock collapsing into the lake, and, thankfully, nobody getting hurt, and how two of the surprised swimmers were our senior citizen landlords who we went to church with in Ames, Iowa — well, then you've heard of the Smithsons. Lee and Jeannette have faithfully sent us a Christmas letter every year, sharing the exploits of their retirement community, our old church, their grandchildren, and their great-grandchildren.

As the years have gone by, we've become just a bit timid about opening their letter. Without saying anything, Amber and I share a look that we both understand to mean, “I hope they're both still... okay.” Amber refers to it as “Schrödinger's Christmas Letter” — if we don't open it, Lee and Jeannette are both okay, and not okay, but we don't know, and so we don't have to let the warmth of the tree and the blankets and the purring cats be pierced. But this time, for some reason, I said it out loud: “I always worry that this will be the year...”

“I know,” said Amber.

I opened the envelope and unfolded the letter and immediately the tears came — tears that surprised me, for a sweet and dear couple, but one we haven't seen for about ten years. “This is the year,” I told Amber. Lee wrote that he and Jeanette were sitting at their kitchen table one morning in January when she suddenly complained of a very bad headache. “With that, her eyes closed, her head tilted to the side, and she slipped into a coma.” After nearly sixty years of marriage, Lee was with her as Jeanette died a few hours later.

Lee went on to describe the grief work he's done this year, how his friends and family and church family have loved him, and how joyful Thanksgiving was with great-grandchildren scampering through his house.

In the description of God's servant we hear that “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” That “bruised” in the Hebrew is more like “crushed,” but the point stands: this one comes not to destroy the beaten down or extinguish the remaining hope of one barely

hanging on, but will instead bring justice. And we know that in God's realm, justice does not mean "law and order" but rather restoration of the holy intention for us all.

There are four of these Servant Songs in Isaiah. So who is this servant that God introduces? If you simply look for servants in the book of the prophet, you'll find that the Persian king, Cyrus, is lifted up as a servant of God, an anointed one. Isaiah spills substantial ink in convincing the people in exile that God is working through this pagan king to bring about their salvation from the Babylonian Empire.

But the servant in this song works through peace, not war, and he comes with a holy message. And so you're back to square one. Is this a messianic figure in the future? God seems awfully intimate with and possessive of this servant: "Here is *my* servant, whom I uphold, *my* chosen, in whom *my* soul delights; I have put *my* spirit upon him." This sounds like an individual. In fact, this sounds like a particular individual to us. And it did to the early Church as well. In his Gospel, Matthew cites this text as being fulfilled in Jesus as Jesus is quietly healing the sick. [Matthew 12:15-21]

For many scholars and rabbis, though, this servant is a poetic description of the community. Of Israel. Of the people. *Here is my servant...doesn't he sound incredible? Well, my servant is you — for I am the God of the covenant — the God of Sinai — the true God. And this is the work I have been calling you to from Abraham on down, and now, in your time of trial, I call you to it again. Bring justice, not with violence, but with teaching. New things are afoot, my people.*

So which is it? In whom does God's soul delight? Who does God appoint to persist in justice? Who brings forth God's Word? Is it Christ? Is it us?

We are in the last lap of Advent. Next Sunday we light the fourth candle, and the very next evening, the long wait gives way to celebration. We will celebrate with festive carols and quiet hymns, marking the moment as breathtakingly sacred and overwhelmingly joyful.

We are waiting for eight more days. We are waiting for Christ to arrive in the night. And our waiting is a dance of time and tense. For he came two millennia ago. And yet we await his arrival now. And we will wait again for his coming in Christmases Future and at the end of time. We remember. We rejoice. We anticipate.

Of course, this is the beginning of the church year, not the end. His arrival doesn't mean we put up the chairs and sweep the floors and call it a night. When he shows up, he's going to have a few things to say. He will do much for us. He will serve us in Word and deed. He will serve us in promises of water and bread and wine. He will serve us in opening our eyes and our ears and inviting us out of the shadows. He will serve us in proclaiming in justice and peace that God is doing a new thing. He will serve us in our weakness, as we push him aside in fear. He will serve us in a death that the powerful dole out as if it were theirs to offer. He will serve us in breaking the grasp of death. He will serve us in startling resurrection life that snowballs into transformed lives from generation to generation.

And in doing so much for us — in serving us — he will ask much of us. He will show us how to love beyond our imaginations and how to do justice that turns walls into tables and how the way that God sees the world astonishes us. He will ask us to leave old ways behind and live boldly, so that the coastlands will be curious what we're up to. He will ask us to reconsider everything and serve God and one another. Whether we are hanging by a thread — all bruised reeds and barely-there flames — or full of strength and Spirit, he will call us to surround and be surrounded by breath and light and new songs.

I opened the second envelope.

It was from Kent Organ and Vicky Curtiss. They were our co-pastors in Iowa. Kent has been the greatest mentor a pastor could have. Over the past fifteen years he has seamlessly moved from being my pastor, to my teacher, to my sounding board, to my colleague, to my friend. There is no one whose advice I trust more, whose voice carries more weight, or whose faithful ministry I seek to emulate more. Kent first battled cancer long before we knew him. It came back around 2000, and the doctors did their holy magic. It came back a few years ago, worse, and the doctors pulled a rabbit out of a hat to get him going again with experimental treatments. This July, the cancer came roaring back.

The best treatment option was a new immunotherapy in which Kent's T-cells were harvested, sent to a lab in California, and re-engineered to become a "cancer-targeting guided missile system." It had terrible side effects which threatened his life, left him very weak, and going in Kent had only a 50-50 shot of living six more months.

All of this I knew before opening the letter. But I hadn't heard from Kent or Vicky since late October. Here came those tears again, as I learned that on November 19th, a PET scan showed him to be in "complete remission." He and Vicky co-preached a Thanksgiving sermon at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago last month. In it, they talked about witnessing the holy in a million different places, and how they saw it in the miraculous work of nurses and doctors and researchers and patient advocates. They took what their family had been through, and used it to bring God's Word to the people on the coast of Lake Michigan.

I read two letters yesterday. They spoke of serving and being served. They spoke of surrounding and being surrounded. They spoke of God's grace. They spoke of a new thing.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (1 John 1:1-5)
Amen.