

“Love Is . . . Promised”
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Advent 1, Nov. 30, 2025
Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:5-33

As you can see from this morning’s Centering Words, today is the first in a series of services united by the theme “Love Is. . . .”

These seven services will carry us through the Advent and Christmas seasons and to the first Sunday of next year, when we’ll celebrate Epiphany, the appearing of Christ to the world and not simply as the Messiah promised to the people of Israel. This series will veer around Lessons and Carols on December 14th and our two Christmas Eve services so that we don’t disrupt the familiar and beloved that we need so much right now.

I chose the theme “Love Is. . . .” to build on this year’s Stewardship campaign, which is currently underway. When the Stewardship Ministry introduced the theme “Love Is. All In.” back on November 2nd, they knew and I knew that one catchphrase, no matter how good, would hardly exhaust the topic of love since, as the First Epistle of John so famously and succinctly puts it, “God is love.”

Whoa, now we’re in some deep waters. If God is love, then love must be really, really big – deep and wide, as we used to sing in VBS. “Many waters cannot quench love,” the Song of Solomon puts it, and that’s referring to only one manifestation of love, the erotic love between two people. Again, an important manifestation of love in our lives, to be sure, but only one and, most of us realize, not the most important.

Advent doesn’t begin with the zing of erotic love. It doesn’t begin with the unbreakable bond of parental love. It doesn’t even begin with the beat-the-drum, rah-rah-ism of patriotic love.

Advent begins with a stump.

Advent begins with what is left when everything else has been taken away. When everything we’d counted on – leaders, schemes, laws, customs, mores, processes, procedures, protections, departments, guarantees – when all of that has collapsed, whatever remains is where Advent begins – “love among the ruins,” as the title of a movie put it some years ago.

There’s something almost subversive about beginning the Christian year with a stump. Most of us, when we think about Advent, imagine candles and wreaths, cozy lights, and a general sense of seasonal uplift – you know, the stuff we’re getting showered with from our screens right now.

But the prophet Isaiah, speaking truthfully on God's behalf, doesn't give us any of that. Isaiah gives us a field of devastation. A nation cut down. A royal line reduced to a stump—just a leftover reminder of what used to be. It's not the sort of landscape anyone would choose for a fresh start.

And yet Isaiah dares to say, "*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...*"

A shoot—from a stump. New life, from what looks lifeless. Hope, from what appears hopeless. Love, promised in a place that feels cut down to nothing.

If we had a screen in our sanctuary this morning I'd show you all a picture of a cut-down stump that's sitting on my kitchen workbench. I left my plants a little too long on the deck this fall and they got frostbitten. And I don't mean a little frostbitten, I mean a lot – with leaves completely blasted, discolored, and hanging lifelessly over the edge of the pots. Welp, I said to myself, there's them – done for.

But since I'm a basically hopeful person, I cut back the dead leaves and stalks and brought the pots into the house and gave them a little fertilizer and TLC and parked them in the sunniest spot in the kitchen and waited. And waited. And waited some more, wondering how long I'd let those forlorn-looking pots of stumps occupy valuable real estate in my kitchen.

And then, just yesterday, it happened: three new shoots appeared, two on one plant, one on the other. New life. New growth. New plants. The hope of things to come.

Advent begins there. Not with tidings of comfort and joy – those will come later – but with a deep, honest acknowledgment of the places in our lives, our world, and even in our faith that feel worn out, cut back, or reduced to almost nothing. Advent begins where we **are**—not where we think we **should** be.

And that is good news.

Because if God can coax life from a stump, then God can meet us anywhere.

Do you believe that? If not, why not? Is it because you don't believe in what God can do or in what you can do? But what if you placed your trust not in your own abilities, or in the abilities of this political party or that one or in this organization or that one, but in **God's** abilities – what difference would that make in your life, to actually believe in God and not in the things of this world? Would that move you from a place of resignation or frustration or anger or despair to a place of peace and joy and hope?

The historical setting for our first lesson is 800 years before Jesus in the kingdom of Judah, the southern division of the monarchy established by King David about two hundred years earlier. That united monarchy of Israel only lasted through two kings – David and his son, Solomon – and then it broke itself in two, with the northern division keeping the name Israel and the southern portion keeping the capital city of Jerusalem. The dream of a people destined to be a blessing to the world hadn't lasted long. And by the time of Isaiah, the northern kingdom,

Israel, had been conquered by the Assyrians, who were licking their chops and eyeing the southern kingdom, Judah, as their next tasty morsel. To say that it was a difficult time doesn't even come close.

But Isaiah had a job to do. Isaiah was a prophet working in the royal court in Jerusalem. In today's reading, Isaiah speaks to people who know what it feels like to lose almost everything. They've seen their nation torn apart, their future destabilized, their trust in leadership shattered. They're living in an era of political turmoil, anxiety, and moral confusion. It felt like the flourishing tree of their people had been chopped down to a stump.

And into that bleakness, Isaiah speaks a promise.

Not the promise of a full-grown tree, not a triumphant return to glory, not an instantaneous fix— but a shoot. A tender new thing. Vulnerable, and slow-growing.

Yet it is enough to begin again.

This shoot, Isaiah says, will embody God's own Spirit—wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and holy awe. This promised one will bring justice for the poor and equity for the meek. This one will reshape the world so that predation becomes peace, hostility becomes harmony, and every threat gives way to flourishing.

It is a sweeping vision—but notice how quietly it begins.

Not with fireworks.

Not with fanfare.

Just a shoot from a stump.

This is how God's **promised love** works. It moves in the overlooked, the ordinary, the easily dismissed. It doesn't bulldoze its way into being. It doesn't have a military parade to celebrate its birthday. It doesn't keep us from self-destructing.

It sprouts.

It grows.

It finds a way.

It persists.

"Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious, boastful, or proud." Those were some of the attributes of love the Stewardship Ministry reminded us of back in November, and that is the promised love that God in Advent asks us to trust.

We wait, during Advent, not with emptiness, but as spiritual seedbeds nurturing the kind of hope that can take root, grow, and flourish. Perhaps in our lifetime, perhaps after we're gone. That doesn't matter. What matters is who we trust, and the one who promises the kind of love

that never, ever fails is the **faithful** one – the one literally **full of faith** – from whom we draw our own faith. **The faith that matters in the world is not our faith in God; it's God's faith in us.**

Luke picks up on Isaiah's theme of unlikely beginnings. Before we get to Mary, before Gabriel's announcement of Jesus' birth, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth—two faithful, aging people who feel as though time has passed them by.

Their lives, too, may have felt like a stump.

Luke goes out of his way to point out that they have done everything right—faithful, righteous, devoted—and still, their deepest prayer has remained unanswered. They have lived with the ache of disappointment.

Many of us know that ache.

Some of us carry it quietly into this sanctuary every week.

Some of us have brought it with us into Advent.

And into their long waiting, the angel arrives with a promise: Your prayer has been heard. New life is coming. Your child will prepare the way for the One who is to come.

But notice the pattern: God's promise to Zechariah and Elizabeth is not the fulfillment itself, it's a preparation. John will not be the Messiah. He will be the one who gets the world ready. Sometimes God's promised love comes not as the thing we long for, but as the first step toward it: a beginning, not the end. An overture, not a finale. A shoot, not a tree. As St. Benedict said in the sixth century, "And always we begin again."

Then Luke introduces Mary.

A young, ordinary woman from an unimportant town. No social standing. No influence. Nothing to commend her to the annals of history—except the openness of her heart.

Gabriel brings her a promise too: she will bear the child who fulfills Isaiah's vision. The child who brings justice and peace. The child who transforms the world with God's love.

Her response is not instant serenity.

First she is *perplexed*.

Then she is *afraid*.

She asks how such a thing could possibly happen.

But then—

she listens.

She trusts.

She consents.

She lets the promise of divine love take root in her: "Let it be with me according to your word."

That is one of the greatest statements of courage in all of Scripture.

Mary steps into a future she does not yet understand, because she trusts the God whose nature, John later tells us, is love.

And this is important:

The promise God gives Mary does not shelter her from difficulty.

It does not guarantee an easy path.

But it does assure her that she will not walk it alone.

The promise is God's presence as her constant companion.

And that, Scripture insists, is always enough.

And, finally, 1 John 4:16, the verse that ties this series together and gives us the theological key to all these stories: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

God does not offer love as a temporary grant or an occasional intervention. God promises love because love is who God is. Which means that God's promises do not depend on our worthiness, our capability, or even our certainty. God's promises depend on God's character.

God promises love because God promises God's own self. "I will not leave you or forsake you," God says to us, which is God's promise of love to accompany us throughout all of life's journey. Love never fails, as Paul said. Faith, hope, and love abide, he went on, and the greatest is love. Why? Because God is love.

Isaiah's stump. Zechariah's waiting. Mary's astonished courage. Our own Advent longing.

All of these are held within the larger, steady truth that God is love, and God's love always finds a way.

Here at the start of the Christian year, on this first Sunday of Advent, we light one small candle—just a single flame. It isn't much. It won't illuminate the whole sanctuary. It won't chase away every shadow. It certainly won't solve the world's problems.

But it is a start. A shoot from a stump. A sign of what is coming. A witness to what God has already promised.

And that is how love comes. Quietly. Tenderly. Faithfully. In small beginnings that carry immense hope.

Friends, in every blighted place of your life, and in every blighted place of this world, God's promised love is already growing. You may not see it **yet**. You may not feel it yet. You may not understand it yet. But God is love. And God is faithful. And God is coming.

And so we wait—not with fear, not with resignation, but with the deep, steady hope that love is promised, and therefore love is on the way. Thanks be to God.