



January 30, 2022: Liturgy of the World for the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
The Very Reverend Amy McCreath
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In this season after the Epiphany, we are invited to explore **what it means that God, who is power and love, has come into the world.** What is this power and love? Who is it *for*? How is it made manifest in us and in our world?

We began this season with the story of the Wise men. Their journey to the manger from another kingdom revealed that the Light of Christ is for everyone: it shines more brightly than national boundaries, or magic or worldly kingship.

We next heard the story of Jesus's baptism. Here we learned that this light humbly invites us to help it shine. Jesus kneels in the Jordan River, asking his cousin John to baptize him.

Then last Sunday we saw Jesus in his hometown synagogue, opening the scroll in the temple and reading from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight, end of oppression." From this we learn that this power and love, the Light is for justice. It is good news for those most in need of it. And Jesus embodies this justice.

That brings us today, and to a gospel that is a bit less direct. Jesus is having a conversation with the folks to whom he just read Isaiah's prophesy. **What does this conversation show us about God, who is power and love, coming into the world?**

Well remember: Jesus grew up with these people. He has just blown their minds by reading with authority and claiming to be the embodiment of the prophesy he read. These folks are living in a time of anxiety and crisis. They are not wealthy. Their stability depends entirely on the whims of a powerful empire far away. And they are human beings, which means they suffer, they fall sick, just like us.

So the news that **one of their own is power and love naturally leads them to think, "We won! He's right here. He's one of us, so we are going to benefit from this amazing power and love *first*, and we will be safe and healed and happy."**

But Jesus isn't going to do that. He reminds them of times when prophets like Elisha and Elijah, whom they revere, did not heal their own but rather used their power and love to serve the most unlikely of people ~ people from other places, people considered unworthy of honoring or healing.

Jesus the physician will not heal himself and his own first. **He will embody the prophetic truth that the last shall be first.** He will leave those he knows the best to walk and work among strangers, among lepers, among foreigners, among tax collectors. He will start there, bringing his power and love to the edges and working his way home.

And his neighbors try to throw him off a cliff.



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Can you blame them? Their lives are hard. Their hope was dimmed. It had taken every ounce of energy left in them to get to the synagogue and lift their hands in worship and open their mouths to sing the psalms. Their throats were weary. And then this amazing thing had happened that promised to change everything, and they wanted it to change their lives, here and now.

I think we get that. We are gathering on a cold winter Sunday, coming off the omicron surge. The last few years have not been easy on us. We have suffered isolation, and illness, and economic uncertainty, especially for business owners. Divisions in our body politic seem intractable. We are clearer than ever of the devastation wreaked by America's original sin of racism, and its ongoing hold on us, in us, among us. We want to make real change, but we are exhausted.

This is time of great challenge for most, crisis for some, and that has its impact in our bodies, our families, and our churches. At times of stress and crisis, community is harder to hold. We are not able to bring our best to one another. We are not able to keep our eyes open to truly see one another. We doubt ourselves, and we find it tempting to revert to sense that there is not enough to go around.

It is easy to want to be first in line for the healing. But in this season of Epiphany, the amazing revelation is that *our healing comes by not being first.*

Our healing and our salvation come from the one who honored those he didn't know over those he did; honored those farthest from his hometown over his besties; made the effort to find the most needy rather than assuming they were outside his judicatory so someone else's problem.

So what does it look to live like Jesus? What does it mean to manifest power and love in this way? Well, Paul gives us the core of the answer in his words to the people of Corinth, which we heard today:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. ...Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Many of us know these words from weddings, but they were actually written to a whole community to help them work through a time of crisis and fractiousness. They are words written to people who are having a hard time being patient with one another and having a hard time waiting for God's healing. People a lot like us.

What most English translations fail to capture is that all these descriptors are verbs, not the adjectives with which they are often translated. So, these descriptions might be better translated along the lines of, **Love waits patiently; love acts kindly. Love celebrates others' healing and success, love steps aside for the other, love goes the extra mile for the person in the most need.** That is, the love that Paul is



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describing takes action; it is not a passive feeling toward another. And all the actions connect us and offer the power and love of God in the service of others so that their gifts and beauty can be revealed.

Through being patient, kind, forgiving - loving, we discover all manner of gifts in one another, we see the abundance at hand, and we discover our connectedness to one another. All of this brings healing.

You know that at Christ Church. You have practiced this kind of love as a partner parish to the MANNA ministry at the cathedral for so many years. Last fall, your pastor and a few of the leaders of your lunch-making ministry offered words for a video we were making about MANNA. Joanna Starr shared so eloquently how your parish lives into this call to love. She explained that the people at

Christ Church depend on one another to make sure the meals are prepared for MANNA and delivered on time. The unhoused people at MANNA depend on Christ Church for a hearty, hot meal. And the people of Christ Church depend on MANNA to teach you that there are a lot of people in the world who need our love and to put your troubles in perspective.

During the pandemic, the Sunday congregation of the cathedral received the gift of MANNA in a new way. For over a year, the housed members of our congregation worshipped from home, on Zoom, and the unhoused members of the MANNA community used the cathedral sanctuary on Sundays to stay warm, have a meal and some coffee, charge their phones, and use the restrooms. All the places they usually would go for these services on a Sunday morning had been shut down during the pandemic - even the drinking fountains in Boston were shut down - so our MANNA ministry expanded to meet their need. On Sundays at 10 am, they would join in the worship services I was leading from my home on Zoom. We who were at our homes could see them in the sanctuary, holding the space. They typed their prayers into the chat bar and we read them aloud. We raised our hands to our computer screens to bless them, and we saw them waving back at us in thanksgiving. At a time when we at home felt isolated, unmoored, unsure what we could do that would be helpful, when we were tempted to just crawl back into bed and pull the covers over our head, MANNA ministered to us. And by showing up each week, we did the same for them.

This challenging season in the life of our churches and our world is a time to **return to the basic practices of love Paul commended to our ancestors in the faith in Corinth**. It is a time to set different goals for ourselves and for our community, to worry less about being like the church down the road and more about bringing the power and love of Jesus to a broken world. It is a time to worry less about returning to a former version of our community and more about how to share love here and now.



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It is so tempting to narrow our vision to what we have lost in this pandemic tide, to want Jesus to heal us, to hear us, to rescue us. That's understandable and human; that's what Jesus's neighbors felt when he preached to them in the synagogue in his hometown.

Today Jesus reminds us that his love is most available to us when we turn our focus to the other. Our gifts are most revealed when we are revealing the gifts of others. **As we do this, we manifest the power and love of our Savior**, who, "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. A

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross," (Phil. 2:6-8).