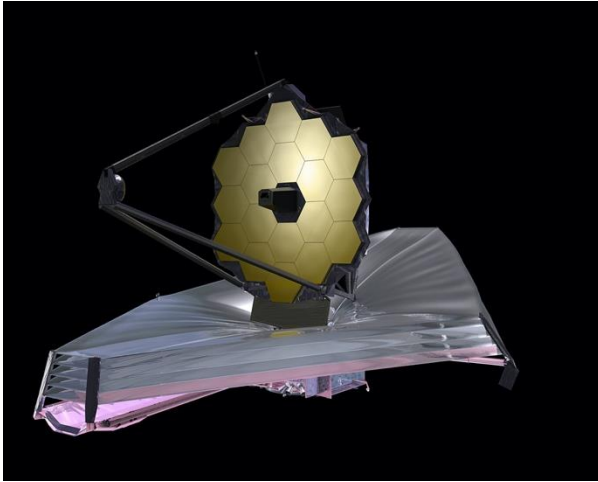


“God works in surprising ways – expansive love”

1 Cor. 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30 (January 30, 2022)

I was interested to see on the news this week that a new telescope has been deployed. The James Webb Space Telescope was launched on Christmas Day and has now reached its destination, achieving a stable orbit around the sun. From there it will begin to peer into the outer reaches of the universe.



Capturing rays of infra-red light, this telescope will enable scientists to see further into space than we’ve ever seen before. It will also help us look back in time, discovering sources of light that originated some 13 billion years ago.

All of which is rather mind-blowing, isn’t it? It’s hard for us to conceive of such things, which are beyond the earth-bound borders that circumscribe our daily lives.

Our scriptures today also stretch us beyond what we may be used to, or what we may be comfortable with. They point us to the most powerful force in the universe, which is God’s love. This love stretches us far beyond our boundaries. God’s love takes us *beyond* our own little world, a world that is friendly and familiar, to encounter

other people. And to discover that they too are loved by God.



In this Epiphany season we’ve been talking about the surprising work of God. Two weeks ago we heard about Jesus’ first miracle, turning water into wine. Jesus brings amazing transformation to our lives - and does so even at the end of the day, when we’re tired and not expecting it. What a surprise!

Last week we heard about Jesus’ teaching at his home-town synagogue in Nazareth. He reads the ancient words of Isaiah about bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind ...

Then he turns to the folks who are there and says that God is doing this work *today*. Not just yesterday, and not just in the future - but God is working here and now. What a surprise!



This morning we continue with this story of Jesus’ teaching. Only today we learn about the crowd’s response. What they think of Jesus’ bold assertion that God is at work in his life and ministry.

The first thing they do is marvel at how well Jesus speaks. They weren’t expecting such a thing. What gracious words from this home-town boy!

Is this not Joseph’s son?” they ask. They can hardly believe their ears. Or get their minds around the fact that a carpenter’s son might consider himself to be God’s designated agent in the world. How can that be?

And so their initial reaction takes a turn toward suspicion. “Who does he think he is, anyway? Jesus may get away with such claims in Capernaum, but they don’t know him. Not like we do.”

Sometimes we think *we* know what God can and cannot do. Because we live in the neighbourhood, we’ve been in this city, we’ve been with these people, we’ve been in this congregation, we’ve heard these scriptures. “And we know before you roll that scroll, Jesus, that this just ain’t going to happen!”

Yes, we know. But do we *really*?



Jesus senses that things aren’t going well. So he moves straight to the heart of the matter. Doubtless you will say: “If you’re a Doctor, heal yourself. Do some miracles, like we heard you did over there, in Capernaum? It’s the least you could do for *us*. Aren’t we your friends? So go ahead and prove yourself!”

There’s a challenging sarcasm in all of this. You can tell they’re not keen on Jesus. And they’ll be even less keen when he’s finished telling them these next two stories.



First, the feeding of a poor widow and her son. A long time ago God sent the prophet Elijah to the Phoenician coast, right in the heart of Baal country.

Do you remember Baal, the ancient god of fertility? Also god of weather, rain, wind, lightning, seasons, war, and sailors. The name Baal means “Lord” or “Master.” And it can refer to any number of local Mesopotamian deities.

It’s into the land of the Baals that Elijah went, at God’s directive. To a poor widow and her son on the edge of starvation. *That* was the place where God was at work!



Unknown artist –
photo by Jastrow (2006), Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=723538>



Now here’s the second story. Long ago God worked through the prophet Elisha to heal Naaman, a great military man who suffered from leprosy.



It happened when a slave girl he’d taken captive blurted out: “I know who can help you.” So a letter was sent, and eventually a great entourage came knocking on Elisha’s door.

The man of God told him to wash in the Jordan River seven times. And although it sounded like foolishness to this great general, a foreigner from hostile territory, his servants convinced him. “What’s the harm in trying?”

Well, lo and behold, God healed him! His flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean!

By B.jehle - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=27098744>



There’s a common thread in both these stories. Can you find it?

God is working in places that fall outside expected boundaries. Often where people are seen as enemies, rather than friends. Beyond what is known and familiar. That is where God is at work!

And it’s these two stories - stories that *belong* to the hometown crowd, stories that come from their very own faith tradition - that drive them crazy.

And I mean *really* crazy! They were absolutely livid. Now these nice religious folk, all clean and fresh from worship, become a rabble.



By Elvert Barnes from Silver Spring MD, USA -
22.ProudBoys.USSC.WDC.6January2021,
CC BY-SA 2.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=98626314>

There’s something about a crowd, isn’t there, that can take on a life of its own. It goes beyond any rationality. We saw it in the storming of the US capital. And we will see it again at Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, where crowds demand his death.

Here they rage against him. And drive him out of their precious synagogue. Out to the brow of a hill where they attempt to hurl him over the edge. So much for his amazing words.



This is what can happen when peace-loving people are stretched beyond their comfort zone. So be careful.

Jesus tells the folk at Nazareth that God's love is bigger than they think. That God's Good News is not for them *alone*. In fact, it never has been.

God's good news is for *all* people. And that's where this morning's surprise comes in. God's love is *surprisingly expansive*. It reaches out to embrace those we don't expect to see. Maybe don't even want to see.

Not all surprises are pleasant, you know. Of course it depends on where you stand. If it's something you don't want to know about, then perhaps it's not a *good* surprise. So it was for the people of Nazareth.

But if it's something you long to hear, deep down, even if you didn't know it beforehand, then the message of God's love for you, an outsider, is very welcome news indeed. It's a *wonderful* surprise.



Do we put up walls? Do we erect barriers? Do we create boundaries to protect ourselves?



By Kyle Taylor from London, 84 Countries - Israel -
Jerusalem - Mount Zion - 03,
CC BY 2.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38442663>

We are all prone to an “us and them” mentality. An “insider/outsider” way of looking at the world, the place we live. Our neighbourhood, our city, our nation. It's ours, we think, and we must protect it.

My religious community. My faith tradition. *Others* are viewed as suspect at best. And at worst as heretics, pagans, infidels. Dangerous and unwelcome intruders.

My ethnic group, my language, my colour of skin, my political views or party affiliation.

These attitudes have caused so much harm over the ages! And they have not gone away. Intolerance and hatred continue to brew, sometimes simmering just below the surface. Sometimes even in those who claim the name of Jesus.

We all have a tendency to make our world small. To look inward, rather than outward. To shrink things down to fit our conception of reality.

But God is inviting us to have a larger field of vision. To see beyond the walls we commonly live within, to a kingdom world that is *almost* beyond our imagining.

Almost, but not quite - *because* we have Jesus!

Like those prophets of old, he will feed the hungry and heal the lepers. And in doing so, the love of God will take him beyond *his own* people, to touch the lives of many.

Well, for goodness sake, what are *we* doing here? Were we not once *outsiders* too?



One of the roots of white supremacy, according to Yale scholar Willie Jennings, comes from the tendency of Euro-Christian folk to think of themselves as insiders, people at the very centre of God's will and purpose.

When in fact, he reminds us, the Christian church is like a branch that's been grafted into a pre-existing tree.

“The reality,” he writes, “is that so many Christians in the West don't know their own story – that is to say, that we were gentiles brought into another people's story. What's supposed to come with that is a sense of humility, a sense of having been brought inside by grace, through love.”¹¹

All of us are here as guests in God's great family. We are *all* recipients of God amazing love.



This week I've been singing to myself a song I learned in childhood. I don't know if it's part of your repertoire or not. But I remember singing it in Sunday School many years ago.

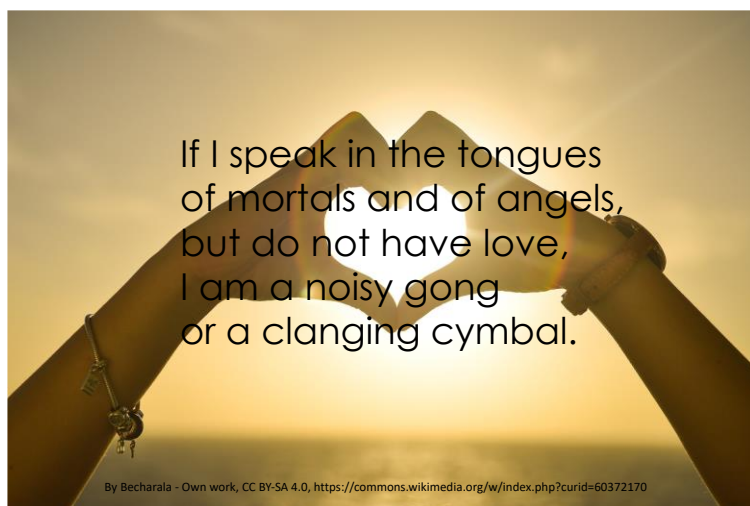
The song was actually written in 1914 by Charles Austin Miles:

Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heaven above;
Deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Savior's love.
I, though so unworthy, still am a child of His care;
For His Word teaches me that His love reaches me everywhere.ⁱⁱ

Do you know that song? It speaks of expansive boundaries and an enormous love. Have you sung it?
Could you sing it still?



In this morning's first reading, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we are given an amazing vision of God's love.



We hear these words quite commonly at weddings. So perhaps we think this passage is about romantic love.

There's nothing wrong with that. It certainly does speak to husbands and wives.

But Paul's original purpose in writing is to instruct a fractured faith community. It's a letter to a church divided by preferences and exclusions, and familiar, cantankerous people.

And it's to such as these that he presents a grand vision.

"Love is patient," he says. So park your impatience with one another at the door. "Love is kind," he says. So there's no need to be mean. "Love is not envious, or boastful or arrogant or rude." So learn how to treat each other with politeness and consideration. "Love does not insist on its own way." So make room for those with whom you may disagree. ...

We could spend our whole time unpacking the wisdom of these words. But what I want us to grasp today is the vision. Look out into the great, expansive universe of God's unending love. What a powerful thing that is!

Does it surprise you?



The James Webb Space Telescope will help us see things we have never seen before. A whole universe that awaits our discovery.

And that, I believe, is what Jesus does for us as well. Helps us see what we cannot naturally take in with our own naked eyes.

God's love is an expansive love. A love that draws us out of ourselves, *beyond* ourselves, to embrace the lives of others. All kinds of people. Insiders and outsiders. Us and them.

As you prepare to leave this morning, I'd like you to think of someone outside your circle. How might you see them in a different way? As a child of God, even?

How might you befriend that person? How might you love and serve them?

May the surprising vision of God's ever-expanding love be with you in the week ahead. Amen.

ⁱ Willie Jennings, "The geography of Whitmess: interview by Matthew Vega," *The Christian Century*, November 2, 2021, p.27,

ⁱⁱ Charles Austin Miles, 1914,

https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Wide_Wide_as_the_Ocean/#:~:text=Wide%2C%20Wide%20as%20the%20Ocean%20%3E%20Lyrics%20%7C,teaches%20me%20that%20His%20love%20reaches%20me%20everywhere., (Accessed Jan. 26, 2022.)