“***God Is Love***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Apr. 11, 2020

**Isaiah 25:6–9**

6 On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear. 7 And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; 8 he will swallow up death for ever.

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. 9 It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**1 John 4:13–20**

13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.

Welcome, Easter people! The risen Savior lives within you. He gives you a spiritual ear to hear with.

What a great pair of Scriptures to work with today! A hopeful and futuristic vision from Isaiah, and a small essay on love from the Apostle John, including one of the two places where he says “God is love” (1 John 4:16).

Let’s start with the Isaiah passage. It starts with a promise of the messianic banquet: “the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food” (25:6). Then there is the intriguing line: “He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations” (25:7). What is that shroud or sheet? Is it death? Death certainly casts a pall over us. The next line implies that this is the topic, since it says “he will swallow up death for ever” (25:8). However, I think it might be the *fear* of death that shrouds human life. It so pervades our lives, makes us nervous and apprehensive. Or is the shroud *sorrow*? That is implied by the following line where “the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces” (25:8). The shroud of sorrow lays heavy on so many people, but it will some day be relieved. Or maybe the shroud is shame and disgrace. The author says “the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth” (25:8). Shame can be like a shroud that blocks people from living fully, since they feel reduced and disgraced in the sight of others. They relive the shaming experience, and are oppressed by it over and over. One of these things, or *all* of these things—death, fear, sorrow, or shame—is the shroud that shall be removed from all the nations.

Think about this idea for a moment. Doesn’t it seem that the minds of people are shrouded, that so many lives are stifled somehow by fear or sorrow or shame? How accurate is the description in Isaiah! Now think of a spiritual gift that feels like the lifting of a shroud, a rediscovery of freedom and a restoration of the joy of living. Even if the shroud has been lifted for *you*, if you have been saved by faith and the light of love has poured in, this is far from true for the whole human race.

Now, is this removal of the shroud something that God will do, something that we humans will do, or something that God and humans must cooperate in doing? I think it has to be the latter. The quote from John’s first letter shows that humans need to actually *practice* love, not just affirm their belief in it. I think there will be no complete removal of the shroud from humanity unless there is a whole lot of loving of the neighbor that is energetically practiced. You don’t arrive at the wiping away of all tears until you get to perfect love, thoroughly developed love. Since perfect love would mean the elimination of fear, you can guess that this full development of love may take thousands of years. There will come a day when the majority of people really are interested in discovering what Jesus was really about. *Then* we can give a “yes” answer to Jesus’ question, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8). When Jesus is really able to find a predominance of faith on earth, then there will be changes in the interaction of God with the human race. It will be like a new world, where no one cries alone, where tears are wiped away. There is a resurrection coming for the human race, though probably not in my lifetime. But there will come that day when “love has been perfected among us” (1 John 4:17), and that will be like a remaking of the world. Perfect love will cast out the fear of death. Jews and Gentiles, Russians and Chinese, black and white will acknowledge the sovereignty of God, and humbly set about to learn the practice of love.

This change comes from recognizing one of the founding principles of Jesus’ revelation, the message that “God is love,” and that “those who abide in love abide in God” (4:16). Out of a truly dynamic relationship with God—abiding in God—comes the ability to love, consistently and impartially.

John probably wrote this letter to the recipients of the Gospel. It is like an introduction and a summary, stressing the gospel’s most important point: God is love, and we must share this love with others. It will be a world-changing love. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

Getting to this place is real kingdom work, involving the effort of building communities of love based on recognition of the love of God. Our assignment is to practice love, to live our lives in a way that makes us receptive to love, and able to heighten hope and love in others. When we do this kingdom work, we are contributing to the day when all tears will be dried, when the shroud that is over the human race will be removed, when faith, hope, and love will be the dominant characteristics that shape human life.

In the here and now, we need to practice love. We do this with the help of the Spirit. As John wrote, “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (4:13). The Spirit comforts, guides, and inspires us, and gives us a message of hope for the whole human race. Jesus demonstrated love and taught of its central role. And he acted out the triumph over death through his Resurrection. You can be part of the Jesus process of transformation. The truth of the risen Savior lives within you. It is a mustard seed that will grow into the greatest bush. It is the promise of life everlasting.

How could you live, then, without joy? So go in joy! Go in peace.