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Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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STRENGTHENING OUR HEARTS

When I was in seminary a good many years ago, I was part of a program that allowed me to serve as a chaplain for a section of a large hospital. As I observed the inner workings of the hospital, I saw it day by day as a beehive of constant activity, most of which was carried out in a calm, orderly way. In one part of the hospital there were surgeries taking place, in another, there were various therapeutic activities. Doctors were making their rounds, nurses were checking vital signs and giving medication, those in intensive care were being monitored. It all proceeded in a composed, business-like fashion.

However, when a patient went into some form of cardiac arrest, the tranquil demeanor came to an abrupt end. This was back when urgent communication relied on a public address system which would use an emergency code the public did not understand so as not to attract curious onlookers who could get in the way of the life-saving attempt. In a measured voice would come the announcement: “Code Blue team report to Room 529, 5-2-9.” To the announcer’s credit, the tone was the same as the matter-of-fact announcement about a change in location for the meeting of the hospital auxiliary group. Nevertheless, immediately after the ‘code blue’ was called, various staff would start sprinting through that part of the hospital. To someone who did not know what was going on, it looked like absolute chaos had broken out on the floor, but each staff member had a specific duty to be done very quickly. One person would usher any family of the patient to a waiting area, others would clear the room of chairs or other furniture to make room for the emergency equipment, others simultaneously would run to get the closest ‘crash cart’ which held the emergency equipment to shock the heart back into rhythm if that was what was necessary to save the person’s life. It seemed as if heaven and earth themselves were being moved to offer every opportunity that the patient’s heart might be restored to its life-giving function.

Best I can tell, our hearts do not indicate that we are in a ‘code blue’ kind of situation. But perhaps, we are in a ‘code purple’ status, one where our hearts still need some therapeutic attention to function at their best. I mention ‘code purple’ because we have moved into the season of Advent, a time marked with purple paraments and candles, when we focus on the anticipated coming of the Lord.

In First Thessalonians, which may well be the earliest of the New Testament books, likely penned even before any of the gospel accounts were, there was an understanding that Jesus would soon return to complete the redemption that had begun with his initial ministry. The author, the Apostle Paul, speaks calmly, but with purpose to call these early Christians to consider what was of importance to their wellbeing as they faced what might lay ahead. He asked that God would be working on their hearts to strengthen them in holiness. I don’t think our hearts require a full ‘code blue’ at this time. But as we enter this season of Advent, what is a ‘code purple’ level of urgency that opens us to a less shocking, but nevertheless redemptive and life-giving work to take place on our hearts?

I’ve noticed that a fair number of the praise songs that some Christians use in their worship describe God most often as being holy, but rarely do those songs define what that means. Many of us, when we hear of holiness, think of spiritual purity. That’s probably how Paul would have defined holiness earlier in his life. You may remember that before his conversion, Paul understood holiness as a devotion to God through dedication to the Hebrew law. His commitment was intense, to the point that he was an early leader of the established faith community’s persecution of those who were followers of Jesus. His zealousness for the faith even led to his involvement with the stoning of Stephen and he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians there when he, through a vision, had an encounter with God’s grace in the person of Jesus Christ that changed his heart and his life.

Some would think our hearts become more holy by separating ourselves from all of the yuck and muck that is part and parcel of human life. And yet, our Lord Jesus came into the midst of human physicality and brokenness and didn’t lose his holiness. When he was met with crass indifference or even a crucifying antipathy, he did not return such ill will. Jesus, as the embodiment of God’s grace, was the

One who led Paul to an understanding of how hearts could be strengthened in holiness. It was by following where that grace would lead.

Where grace leads is toward the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. If our hearts are “to increase and abound in love for one another and for all,” as Paul describes it, then it will be through reflecting the love we have experienced through our Lord Jesus. Those who have received very little love in their lives have great difficulty showing love for others, and perhaps even for themselves. But we have been showered with God’s love, with its manifestations taking many forms.

This is a time of year when many of us welcome the heartwarming experiences that come with some of our buying, giving, decorating, and singing traditions. I love heartwarming stories and practices as much as anyone, and some of those events that warm our hearts can also transform them. But some of what we may find to be ‘heartwarming,’ may just get us feeling so cozy inside that we wouldn’t recognize the need for our hearts to actually be strengthened. In this ‘code purple’ time, God can warm our hearts in a different way. Cold and exacting hearts are focused more on the wrong that others are doing than upon the possibilities of reflecting God’s generous love and kindness. When our hearts beat for the love of God, then they have been warmed and strengthened by the Holy One who designed them.

I am thankful for the amazing things that the medical community can do to address heart problems. And when someone’s heart stops beating, it is a great thing that a ‘code blue’ or some other updated code can be announced so that emergency action can take place. But as this ‘code purple’ time of Advent has been announced, we can be shaped by the emerging action of the rich grace of the divine love that reached out to redeem hearts through the initial coming of our Lord Jesus, a divine love that is still transforming hearts and will ultimately conclude that good work in God’s own time. If we were to take some spiritual cardiogram that indicates where our hearts are weak, we might get discouraged that our hearts could ever grow stronger. Some things are within our reach but beyond our grasp. Our Advent hope lies not in the strength of our own hearts, but in the strength of that most loving and holy heart that never ever stops beating for us. God wants to and has the capacity to strengthen our hearts in holiness during this therapeutic ‘code purple’ season. Let’s turn our attention to the One who can make us whole and holy. Amen.