

Christmas 2 (B)
January 3, 2021
Texts: Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:1-18

Pastor Aaron Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, OR

A few years ago, when we were on vacation visiting my mom in Arkansas, she was excited to take the grandkids to a diamond mine. It's called the Crater of Diamonds State Park, near Murfreesboro, Arkansas. The state park is a field that stretches across acres and acres, and is the remains of an ancient volcanic crater. The diamonds were formed long ago, deep underground under enormous pressure, then brought to the surface in a volcanic eruption. Over millions of years, the volcanic debris has eroded, leaving the diamonds to be discovered there in the dirt. Every day, hundreds of people take their buckets and shovels out to dig, because it's one of the only places in the world where you or I, or anyone else, could go search for diamonds in their original volcanic crater.

You can probably imagine how excited the grandkids were. They had visions of discovering some huge, beautiful rock worth lots of money. And even though they didn't find any diamonds, they did have fun. They loved digging in the dirt, and they found a number of interesting looking rocks, some that were quartz, or maybe jasper. And they learned that diamonds are tremendously rare. There were acres upon acres of dirt—the eroded volcanic debris. All of it had been, at one time, buried deep in the earth under great pressure. But only a tiny amount ever came to the surface as diamonds because of the unique conditions under which they were created.

I thought about that trip to the diamond mine this week as I was reflecting back on this past year. We have all been under tremendous pressure through the past year. The whole world has been under tremendous pressure! The pandemic has brought fear and worry—about getting the disease, about the safety of people we love. The virus has interrupted plans and created isolation and loneliness. For some it's brought real financial hardship. This year has brought increased awareness of racism and injustice, and the inequalities that exist in our society. We're in the middle of profound cultural change. There were also the forest fires, and so much more.

There has been so much pressure, but it hasn't uniformly produced diamonds, has it? Many times, we've seen people acting out of their anxiety and fear. It's like they're crumbling under the pressure. We've seen people turn to violence and demonizing others as a way of trying to hold onto the past, or hold onto something they thought of as normal, or maybe just shield themselves from all of the chaos. The only thing they're really doing is just working their stuff out on everyone else.

But there is good news for us in our scripture readings for today. They tell us that even when the world is going bonkers around us, we don't have to go bonkers with it, because our faith not only promises that God's purposes for love and forgiveness and healing will in the end prevail, our faith also gives us a glimpse of how God is at work in the world, even now, to transform this world by the power of God's love. Ephesians says that in Christ, God has revealed God's plan—a plan to gather the whole cosmos up into an embrace of love. God's plan is to

heal what is wounded and bring home what is lost and restore what is broken—that's the plan we saw at work in Jesus' life. Our faith reminds us to trust that God holds this world, and each of us, in love. God sees every creature as a precious jewel.

It's probably important to say we don't believe that God's plan involves micromanaging the thoughts and actions of every person and every creature, like some kind of huge puppet show. It certainly seems that God fully respects the freedom of this whole creation to react with fear and anxiety, even violence and hate. But none of that changes God's commitment to love this creation, to love each and every one of us, and to love us into hope instead of anxiety, and courage instead of fear, and compassion instead of hate, and self-giving, sacrificial love instead of violence.

Our gospel reading for today offers a beautiful way of picturing God's love at work. John describes Jesus as the Word of God, in the flesh. Jesus is God's self-expression. The Greek word is Logos, related to our word Logic. Jesus embodies the logic of God's transforming love. Jesus shows us that God's logic is not to judge or condemn, but to forgive, to bring reconciliation and healing. And Jesus accomplishes this, not only by sharing this journey through life with us, but finally through the cross, through self-giving, sacrificial love. The world has never been able to see God, but Jesus makes God known to us.

And when God's logic of compassion and forgiveness and self-giving, sacrificial love makes its way into our hearts, when it begins to transform what we want and how we treat each other and how we respond to disappointment or danger, then when we go through experiences of intense pressure, we begin to become the diamonds. I know, because I've seen them. I've seen the sparkling beauty of people who trust God's good purposes, who trust Jesus' way of self-giving, sacrificial love. I've seen that loss and grief can create compassion and generosity. I've seen how being forgiven can create humility and kindness and a forgiving heart. I've seen how trusting God can create courage and boldness. Those are the most beautiful diamonds of all.

I want to tell you about some of the diamonds I've seen. On Christmas Eve, as we were singing Silent Night together, I looked across the screen and saw your beautiful faces, pathed in candlelight, with the flames flickering. It was so beautiful! You really were just like diamonds, bright and sparkling. I've seen diamonds in some wonderful acts of generosity this past year, as some of you gave abundantly, sacrificially, to care for neighbors, to provide for people you didn't even know—but you only knew that they were going through a time of real need. Those are beautiful, sparkling diamonds. I saw diamonds in some of the expressions of kindness and support our family has received as we've gone through some hard challenges in this past year. And I know how you care for each other that same way. Those are beautiful, bright, sparkling diamonds. And I give thanks to God for every one.

I also give thanks for all of the ways God is still forming us to become diamonds. Through these challenging, pressure-filled times, God is nurturing and supporting and shaping in us fortitude and resilience and courage and vulnerability. It turns out that what makes the diamonds isn't only the pressure. Some special grace is needed, and I pray that as we experience whatever pressures 2021 will bring, I pray that you will know yourself to be positively immersed in grace—so that your life will shine like a diamond. Thanks be to God. Amen.