

Third Weekend of Advent (RCL/A): Mauna Loa and the Eruption of God's Love
Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11
December 10-11, 2022
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I know some of you have visited the Big Island of Hawaii, where Mauna Loa has been erupting since November 27th, for the first time since 1984. The aerial videos are incredible, showing a fiery orange river of lava flowing from the Northeast Rift in the cone, flowing, flowing, flowing.... One of the island residents, a transplant from California, expressed concern in an interview that the lava would cut off the highway to the only Costco on the island.¹ Other residents, native Hawaiians who call themselves Kanaka Maoli, aren't worried about access to Costco, but are actually rejoicing, not because the eruption draws tourist interest and dollars, but because the eruption is a sign to them that Pele, the goddess of volcanoes, is making an appearance. That belief isn't just the stuff of mythology from the past; it's some native Hawaiians' religion in the present. One prof explained, "People here say, 'I've cleaned my house, prepared everything to welcome her... This is her land. She can take it.'"² A woman and her 12 year old daughter traveled to the cooled lava field and left bird of paradise flowers as an offering to Pele. A picture in the paper also showed additional offerings: fresh garlands left on fence posts and a scallop shell holding a round loaf of bread. Perhaps some leave these gifts to placate the goddess and beg her to stop the eruption. Others, though, are simply engaging in an act of devotion by leaving their gifts. I hadn't realized there is also a Hawaiian goddess of snow; her name is Poliahu. Snowcapped Mauna Kea, a dormant shield volcano, is fairly close to fiery Mauna Loa. One observer reads the eruption as the two goddesses, Pele and Poliahu, talking to each other.

That whole scenario made me think of Advent. Advent preparation includes cleaning the house for the Christmas celebration, dusting away cobwebs, sweeping up pine needles, making food, preparing gifts and lighting candles to illumine the way for the God who comes, not with fire, sulfur and brimstone, all reminiscent of a volcanic eruption, but with the kitten cry of a newborn child.

John the Baptist was a fire-and-brimstone kind of guy. He warned his listeners that One was coming after him who would have a winnowing fork in his hand to separate wheat from chaff and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire! That's an agricultural image that needs a bit of unpacking. The wheat would be harvested and bundles placed on a threshing floor. A winnowing fork is a giant wooden fork/shovel used to lift and sift a bundle of wheat so valuable kernels separate from the inedible hull or "chaff." Chaff is flammable. They burned it to dispose of it. They had to be careful, though, because it could even be explosive. Frequently caught up among the bundles gathered in the fields there would also be snakes, who could be seen slithering off the threshing floor as the winnowing process happened. John the Baptist used that image, too, accusing his hearers of being like snakes slithering off quickly to avoid the judgment to come. His preaching **riveted** people. He drew huge crowds from great distances in inhospitable places. He said that One was coming after him who was so much greater that John didn't even qualify to kneel down and undo the Other Fellow's shoelaces. Then John was arrested.

We don't have time to go into that whole story, but in a nutshell John the Baptist criticized a regional politician, Herod Antipas, calling him out as immoral for having married his brother's wife. His wife, Herodias, was furious at John for causing her public

embarrassment, so we can imagine it was she who convinced her husband to “shut up” John in more ways than one!

In those days, like today, there was a grapevine that reached even prisoners. John’s disciples were somehow able to communicate with him: maybe a sympathetic guard? John asked them to approach Jesus and ask if He was the Promised One, the Messiah, for whom John had been waiting. Jesus answered, “He’ll figure it out for himself if you just tell him what you yourselves have seen:

...the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them.”
(Matthew 11:4-5)

There wasn’t much good news for the poor from any **other** quarter in those days. And in **any** day, those healings would be miraculous. These are not mere signs that God is “inbound”; these are not just seismic tremors that predict and precede a future eruption: these are all evidence that the divine explosion of the Incarnation has occurred! God is **already** here, for those with eyes to see!

What’s it like for people on the Big Island to live within striking distance of one very active and one currently dormant volcano? Do they ever think of the fate of Pompeii?? I’m thinking that’s got to be a bit more nerve-wracking than wondering when the next Superstorm will wash over the Jersey Shore. Regardless of who we are or where we live, our energies **could** be sapped by fear of what the future will bring – if not fears about weather and global warming, then anxieties about international conflicts, domestic problems, onset or acceleration of illness, aging of loved ones or ourselves. But our energy is better channeled into trusting that God’s promises about the future will be fulfilled,

including the mending of all that is broken, the resurrection of all that is dead, the restoration of creation, a new heaven and a new earth.

When Pastor Mark, Kristiane and I were in the visitor center of Volcano National Park on the Big Island, I was fascinated by a display of beautiful, glassy, teardrop-shaped volcanic stones called Pele's Tears. I guess I assumed belief in Pele's existence expired along with Hawaii's existence as an independent kingdom in the late 19th century. Not so. 'Should've known, because we **did** see the protests as we drove up to the Mauna Kea space telescope/astronomy site. For Native Hawaiians Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea constitute sacred ground and are not suitable as either scientific labs or strolling grounds for tourists.

Some people see **our** belief in Jesus, God's Son, having come once and promising to come again, as mythology. But **we believe** because we have received the gift of faith to see our God at work in this world. We have received the gift of trust that our lives are safe in God's keeping: the loving Creator who has willed us into existence, who has given us the gift of the Son, our Redeemer, and who blesses us with the Holy-ing Spirit. The love offerings we bring aren't tropical garlands, leis, bird of paradise blossoms, or loaves of bread cradled in scallop shells. We offer in gratitude the gift of our lives, devoted to worshiping God and serving our neighbor. May what others see and hear in **our** lives bear eloquent witness to the eruption of God's love and the reality of God's presence wherever we go, near or far. Amen

¹Simon Romero, "Sizzling Spectacle Of Nature Caught In a Cultural Rift," *New York Times* (December 9, 2022), A14.

²Ibid.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham