

Remembering Our Baptisms
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Isaiah 42:1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

After the café-style New Years Day service last Sunday, I went, yes... to the mall. Not how I usually spend a Sunday or a holiday, but New Years Day also happens to be my husband's birthday, and I had a bit of last-minute shopping to do. I went into a store and was looking at ties and abruptly found myself in a coughing fit. I couldn't stop – I was, well, choking. I found a seat steps away in a comfy chair (thank you, God!) and sat to try to catch my breath and subdue the coughing. I wondered how I would make it home without my usual water bottle I carry everywhere that I had forgotten this day. My eyes were not only watering, tears were literally streaming down my face.

Suddenly, the cashier appeared in front of me, offering me a bottle of water. Though I couldn't thank her just yet, I managed to take a few sips that relieved my throat and with a few more sips the coughing ceased. Before I left the shop, I told the woman how much I appreciated what she did for me. I told her that I am a pastor and I teach about caring for people in the way that she just did. Didn't Jesus say "Those who believe in me will never thirst?" and "To those who are thirsty, give them a drink?"

The gospel was enacted at the Village at Corte Madera last Sunday afternoon at Vineyard Vines: the generous and caring cashier providing the needy, suffering customer a drink. Though the cashier wasn't at our worship service, she is part of the Kingdom of God – there from her clothes-folding and stacking Sunday at work.

In today's Gospel passage, the now grown-up Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan, about 70 miles, to be baptized by John, who is baptizing with water for the repentance of sins. John is uncomfortable with this arrangement, as he feels it would be more appropriate for Jesus to baptize him, than the other way around. Jesus affirms that it is indeed proper, to fulfill all righteousness.

We know already by this 3rd chapter of Matthew, that prophecy has been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. By "righteousness," Jesus is likely speaking about divine approval, or doing God's will. Jesus being baptized in water by John in the Jordan will be doing God's will, it is what is deemed right by the God.

And indeed, the heavens acknowledge this to be so as the heavens open up and the Spirit of God descends like a dove alighting on Jesus, and a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The Trinity, right there, in full view. Clearly, yes, John baptizing Jesus is God's will. Why do you think this is, and does this mean that when we today are baptized, that we, too are doing God's will, that it meets God's approval?

There is a transformation that happens in the baptism of Jesus, and so, presumably, in ours as well, as Jesus became one of us in humankind. In the Presbyterian tradition, we consider baptism to be the outward sign of an inward grace. Baptism is an acknowledgement of having been claimed by God and an outward, public acceptance into the family of God. God invites us, and we choose, through baptism in community, to accept God's invitation. To RSVP.

What does it mean to accept God's invitation to be part of the family of God? For Jesus, his baptism was the beginning of his ministry. And thus it is ours as well.

Let's look more closely at the Isaiah passage. It begins, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations;" sounds a bit like how the Matthew passage ends: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The Isaiah passage specifies the chosen, delightful one as a servant who will bring justice to the nations. Justice is mentioned 3 times in these 9 verses, and is similar to the word in the Matthew passage, righteousness, or divine approval, doing God's will.

The servant in Isaiah establishes justice with gentle compassion, not callously breaking the already-bruised reed, nor extinguishing the dimly burning wick. This servant doesn't kick those who are down, but lifts them up. Gives them hope. How? The passage says, "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, taken you by the hand, and kept you, given you as a covenant to the people and a light to the nations." The servant is able to be a light because God is partnering, God is holding hands in solidarity, God is keeping the servant safe and strengthened and successful. The servant is not alone. Jesus is not alone. We are not alone.

The Isaiah passage continues, "I have called you... to open blind eyes and bring out prisoners from the dungeons who sit in darkness."

Though we jump to the grown-man Jesus in today's Scripture, when just two weeks ago we were celebrating his birth, we are wise to remember the few passages in between. When Jesus was a refugee. Just one chapter back in Matthew's gospel, we read: *Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."*

There are those today in countries that would prefer to stay, to linger with their newborns and toddlers in familiar territory, but who are instead prompted, like Joseph, to flee to foreign countries because of murderous dictators who threaten their lives and the lives of their children. They take the risks of perilous sea crossings, refugee camps and an unknown future rather than staying in their own homes and cultures living in terror.

Jesus knows what it is to be an outsider, to be on the run, to be in fear for one's life, hiding, homeless and hungry.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph were likely not warmly received in Egypt, as foreigners with their many differences: indecipherable language, strange dress, bizarre religion, peculiar foods, odd holidays, and unfamiliar customs. Some Egyptians may have feared that Joseph the carpenter would take a local's job.

This personal refugee experience in Jesus' childhood undoubtedly informed him in his later ministry to the marginalized – to be a light to those who are outcast because of any number of reasons: illness, deformity, or ethnicity. Jesus' refugee experience certainly influenced him, compelling him to feed the hungry, befriend the

friendless, welcome the outsider. This is God incarnate. This is God's servant in whom he is well-pleased, who seeks not the comfort of self but to comfort the other. This is Jesus, who as a young boy was forced to flee with his family an evil regime in order to survive.

This is how the Spirit of God, that descends on Jesus at his baptism, works in the ministry of Jesus. Like the thorn in Paul's side that when he asked to have it removed the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you," Jesus' past as a homeless refugee gives him the compassion he needs to confront the reality of the times and to faithfully bring forth justice.

The quote on the outside of the bulletin is just half of the poem by theologian Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas." The full poem is this:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

This is the ministry to which Jesus was called in his baptism, and to which we are called in ours. Because in baptism we are found, we are called to find the lost; because in baptism we are made whole, we are called to heal the broken; because in baptism we are fed, we are called to feed the hungry; because in baptism we are freed from the captivity of sin, we are called to release the prisoner; because in baptism we are included in the worldwide family of God, we are called to rebuild the nations; because in baptism we are relieved of conflict and distress, we are called to bring peace among the people; because in baptism we are told that we are Beloved and pleasing to God, we are called to make music in our hearts.

We do not pursue this calling on our own. We partner with God and with one another. Friends, where is it that God is calling us to bring sight and light? Who is it today that is thirsty, to whom we can provide a drink, a bottle of water? Who is hungry, that we can provide a meal? Who is imprisoned, that we can release? As we remember our baptisms today, and the covenant that we entered, let us not lose sight of our partnership with God and Jesus Christ in bringing justice and light to the nations. Let us embrace the love that God claimed upon us at our baptisms by remembering our covenant.

For those of you who have not been baptized, if you have an interest, feel free to speak with me after the service or at a later time and I would love to discuss this opportunity with you.

We remember that baptism is a moment in the Christian community when we recognize the grace of God living in each creation, and that God offers us the possibility of transformation, a continuing process of renewal of body, mind and spirit which takes place within faith communities. In the baptismal waters we are buried with Christ in his death, and raised to share in his resurrection, reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.

By water and the Holy Spirit, we are made members of the church, the body of Christ, and joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice. The promise we are given in baptism is that Christ is with us, always. We are not ever left alone. We belong to God.

If there is anything to remember this day, it is the good news that we are all, each and every one of us, beloved and chosen children of God, in whom God is delighted and well pleased.

Amen.