

Baptism of Christ/1st Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.11.26

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." (355)

I am deeply unnerved by the events of this past week, and I imagine you are too. I'm thinking of the action in Venezuela and all that it portends, and the murder of Renee Nicole Good and all that it will have unleashed going forward.

ICE, as we know, is an agency more generously funded than most militaries around the world, with nearly oversight or accountability or indeed training for its officers, which will more and more likely function as a secret police for Donald Trump and Steven Miller, whose loathing for most people could not be more on display.

And Trump, as we now know, is a president who believes nothing can stop him when it comes to the use of force, nothing, he claimed in an interview with the *New York Times*, but "his own morality." Morality, of course, is itself a thing very hard to pin down, but in his case its evidence of being real is only in its apparent utter absence. This is a profoundly immoral man, and we are suffering his presidency, he who is an abusive father coming at us as if we are, most of us, his misbehaving children, naughty children who deserve what we get.

Nicole Good: that we are even considering her character and alleged political activity, that we are even considering such things, as if such things would ever justify being shot in the street: many in governance do not understand what the United States is. Many coming at us with guns, and apparently phones recording the whole thing as a snuff film, don't understand what the United States is. We are allowed to say what we want. We are allowed peacefully to assemble. We are allowed to redress our government. We are allowed even to displease those who mean to manage us, control us, menace us, to mouth off if we want to. I have no idea if Ms. Good was being cooperative or displeasing, though recent video evidence suggests the former, her last words to the officer and, turns out, to anyone in life were, "I'm not mad at you." But none of this matters. This whole line of consideration is unamerican because it simply doesn't matter. This is a place where no one rightly gets shot in the street.

I want to tell you about the person in whose name we gather in this place. I want to tell you not because I think you don't know but because sometimes it's helpful to be told again something you *do* know, told again a story you even know by heart.

It's not for nothing small children want to hear the same story before bedtime every night for months on end. It's not for nothing that, faced with the spooky necessity of sleep and the unnerving fall of daily darkness, children want to hear *Runaway Bunny* for the tenth time this week or *Where the Wild Things Are* even though by this point, they could recite it along with you.

I want to remind you of what this person is like, this person that you already know so well, this one who is the Lord God, the Creator of all things though come to us to abide with us, come as a created one into this created order. I want to remind you because it might reassure you as it has me this week when so much of what was happening was deeply unnerving.

The songs of the Suffering Servant are a mystery in many ways. Four poems dropped into the middle portion of Isaiah's prophecy, these directly mention a servant, here and nowhere else, though with little clarity as to who this servant might actually be.

What we know of Isaiah the prophet is slightly more. It's widely thought that this longest book of prophecy in the Bible is actually three books, composed by three different prophets at three different periods in the life of the people.

A prophet is someone who can read the signs of the times in such a way as gives a sense for what the future might hold. The biblical books of prophecy are fifteen in number, three of whom are considered major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) and twelve considered minor simply for their books being far shorter. What they as people who produced books had in common is this

capacity to consider what life was like for the people Israel and Judea, and rightly to imagine how current conditions were likely to play out. True prophets were established as such after the fact, when what they imagined would happen was indeed what came to happen. False prophets were proven by the passage of time to be people who just popped off and were usually wrong, sometimes cynically so.

Isaiah proved a true prophet three times over.

First Isaiah spoke forth prior to Babylon's attack, prior to the empire's invasion of the land, the destruction of the capital city, and the tearing down of the Temple at its heart. He spoke words of warning because he could see that the people's response to the foreboding of empire closing in was counter-productive. The powerful, the elite trolling for war, national pride clouding the sight for what was more likely to happen—that Babylon would crush them, especially if they tilted toward war. This tiny nation, Judea, was no match for Babylon, not even if they allied with neighboring nations. Their pride would get them nowhere. Their nationalism would get them destroyed. So it was warned, and so it came to be.

Second Isaiah spoke forth from amidst the attack and the enforcement of exile. No longer free to live in their land, which land would itself thrive with crops and blessing, the strong would be taken as war booty to Babylon, the beautiful, the capable. The weak would be left behind amidst the rubble, the very young and the old, the sickly and the lame. And all of this would be taken as evidence that the Lord has lost faith in the people, for the people apparently having lost faith in the Lord. They went their own way. They pursued power and pleasure. They served the mighty and forswore the lowly. Injustice flourished—so Babylon might rightly be understood as doing the Lord's bidding, a shocking thing that Second Isaiah dared suppose.

Third Isaiah spoke from the exile but with of the possibility of return, fifty years later, evermore the likelihood of return. The people would be able to return to their land, would be able to rebuild their houses and vineyards, their synagogues and villages, even their capital city and its heart, the Temple.

As for the songs of the suffering servant, these dot Second Isaiah, when humiliation was everywhere, when cause for bitterness and resentment was everywhere, and when any return the people might hope for (hoping against hope) might be energized by the furnace of resentment, a feeble if though furious spirit of payback. The people brought low would return to their former glory, indeed would be made great again. There would be a turning of the tables, that long promised day of vengeance for "our God."

The songs of the suffering servant put forth a different vision. That God's salvation comes into the world by virtue of one whose gentleness would be profound, one who'd willingly suffer that others might be spared suffering. This one, indeed, as we heard in this morning's reading, would take such care as not even to break a though bruised reed or quench a though flickering flame. The weakest, the most vulnerable, would be this one's chief concern.

The song we heard just now is the first to appear in Isaiah. This is the first time we meet this so-called servant, where we see mostly about his manner and his effect. Though gentle, though very gentle, he will also effect tremendous change, righteousness of the eternal sort. Light to the nations that otherwise rage in darkness, sight and thereby wisdom to those who otherwise stumble about as if blind, freedom for those otherwise prisoners in dungeons whether physical, psychical, or socio-structural: see, the way the Lord will establish his righteousness is by means counter-intuitive in the world. This won't be by overwhelming force, but by redeeming love because the former things will have come to pass and something new will be springing forth.

The gospel writers recognized in Jesus the very spirit of this long-promised servant. They saw in Jesus (of whom they meant to write so that their testimony would outlast their own lives) the very spirit of this servant who'd bring about a new thing. And so, they wrote of Jesus with word and image recalling Isaiah's prophecy of a half millennium prior. And so, we inherit the reassurance that God comes to us not with the sort of force the world might so proudly wield, so shamelessly wield, but something altogether different, altogether new.

You might remember last month, if you were here on the 2nd and 3rd Sundays of Advent, that John the Baptist had his expectations all wrong too. John, Jesus' cousin, who would be the herald of Jesus, ever going before him to prepare a way in the world for his coming, had his expectations all wrong. He was sure the one to come would bear forth from a spirit of vengeance, would come as if to a threshing floor where, winnowing fork in hand, he would separate the wheat from the chaff, would put the wheat into the storehouse while throwing the chaff into unquenchable fire. But then Jesus arrived and didn't do any of that. Even while John went on to suffer the worst of worldly power, the king imprisoning him for no good reason, imprisoning him in an ancient CECOT, dungeons built explicitly to break people, Jesus still wasn't winnowing, still wasn't burning.

So, John sent word from prison, sent some of his disciples to go to Jesus, to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" because Jesus just didn't seem like the

Lord's vengeance personified, just didn't seem like righteous recompense made manifest. He seemed way too acquiescent, not nearly enflamed and enraged enough.

Which you can see even in the way he was baptized by John. Here we see an uninterest in dominating. John seems almost embarrassed that he would baptize Jesus; the power differential is just too great and too obvious. But Jesus wouldn't have it any other way. "Let it be so for now," he would say to his cousin that he might submit to a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. This, though if ever there were a person who needed neither to repent (which is to return while also to have changed your mind, enlarged and expanded your mind and imagining) nor to do it in the hopeful reassurance of forgiveness of sin, it was Jesus. Really, if ever there were a person who didn't need John's baptism, it was Jesus. No matter: "Let it be so for now." A patience about the world where what we might hope for is an impatience about all things we know are wrong, all the things we want furiously to change.

We have three more years of this presidency. Unless Congress acts, which in its current form it likely won't, we have three more years of suffering this man who, though diminishing in strength and popularity, grows more dangerous—and indeed *because* he's diminishing in strength and popularity. This indeed is our great crime as a people, our offense as naughty children of a father who thinks himself our protector and savior—that large numbers of us don't like him, don't admire him, don't even fear him (on our good days). For this, we deserve the beating we're gonna get.

We have three more years of this. Most likely. All of which is the churning backdrop of more personal pain for so many of us. We are each of us facing a scary diagnosis and a daunting course of treatment, or we're caring for one who is; or we're dying or caring for someone who is; or we're crippled with anxiety or worried for someone who is; or we're uprooting our lives to move to a better place though leaving behind a whole houseful of memories and achievements, or we're caring for someone who is. I can't think of a single person here who isn't in a personal press right now, so a world that horrifies would be nice not to have.

Yet here we are.

Here we are with Jesus—he who is both a personal grace to us and so powerfully noncompliant that the state saw fit to kill him too. When life bears down, remember him, follow him, he who saved the world through gentleness and care.

Keep the faith.

Let's do it together.

Thanks be to God.