

Meditation – “In Whom God Delights”

Scripture Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, January 8, 2023

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On this first Sunday after Epiphany, we remember together the Baptism of the Lord and celebrate the beginning of Christ’s ministry; a ministry which reflects the character of the suffering servant announced in our first scripture reading, Isaiah 42:1-9. As we begin a new year together and reflect on the possibilities before us to do the work of justice and transformation, let us open our hearts and minds to the word of God.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon the servant; who will bring forth justice to the nations.*

² The servant will not cry or lift up a voice, or make it heard in the street;

*³ a bruised reed the servant will not break,
and a dimly burning wick the servant will not quench;
the servant will faithfully bring forth justice.*

*⁴ The servant will not grow faint or be crushed until the servant has established justice
in the earth; and the coastlands wait for the servant’s teaching.*

*⁵ 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: ⁶ 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, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness. ⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name;*

my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

*⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them. Amen.*

Our second reading is Matthew’s account of the Baptism of our Lord, chapter 3:13-17. Although John is hesitant to baptize his cousin, Jesus insists that it is the right thing to do. Jesus’ baptism inaugurates the ministry of the suffering servant to which he has been called and affirms Christ’s willingness to be fully immersed in our humanity and to step into the river of life with us. Hear now, God’s holy word.

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, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him, and Jesus 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.” Amen.

The title of the meditation: “In Whom God Delights”

Text: Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights...Isaiah 42:1

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for letting us know what delights your soul. As we begin a new year remembering our baptisms and reaffirming our baptismal covenants, strengthen us in the living of our lives that we may seek justice and be among the children in whom you delight. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

We begin the Season of Epiphany, the Season of Light, with the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Today we commemorate the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his public ministry at age 30. We also remember our own baptisms with joy and thanksgiving. We are grateful that Jesus met us at the banks of the Jordan and was immersed into the waters of our life experience.

We rejoice in the promises made and kept on our behalf within this community of faith through the years as we ordain and install new church officers who continue the circle of faith, who respond to the call to serve, and who seek to be among those in whom God delights. We give thanks for the powerful symbol of water in our life; a symbol that reminds us not only of the chaos and danger of deep, overwhelming water, but also of the cleansing and refreshing streams along the desert paths we are sometimes called to journey.

Last fall, following a delightful dinner at the historic Wittmond Hotel Restaurant with a few friends from Westminster, Peter and I took the ferry to Grafton, Illinois on our way to St. Louis for a doctor's appointment the next day. While driving along the Great River Road at sunset, we visited the Village of Elsah where we previously had stayed at a bed and breakfast with our son Paul following a harrowing bicycle adventure along the Mississippi in 2007.

We phoned Paul that night to reminisce our journey together, and we listened to a CD version of Moon River in honor of the friendship forged by Mark Twain's Huck Finn and the enslaved Joe on their Mississippi raft which transcended the racism and injustice alive and well along the banks they traveled. The three of us remembered visiting an Underground Railroad Station on the Mississippi and dining in Alton, where the abolitionist and martyr Rev. Elijah Lovejoy died in 1837 a few weeks after founding members of this congregation signed his handbill.

What made that bicycle adventure unforgettable was an unexpected storm we encountered along the river. We were about 45 minutes from our destination when the sky began to turn dark in the distance. We watched the ominous clouds and what appeared to be a downpour across the Mississippi hoping against hope we would make our destination before the rain caught us. Then we felt our first drop, and another, and another. The character of the gentle drops began to change. The sky was now dark above us and the rain became more intense. When we finally arrived, we were drenched, muddy, cold, and exhausted. We found solace and strength in the hot showers that cleansed our bodies and reassured our spirits. Together, along the shores of the Mississippi we had been baptized by storm.

A few years later in 2012, the fall before Westminster called me to be your pastor, I sat on the shores of the Mississippi once again during a spiritual retreat I was leading at Pere Marquette Lodge, reminiscing God's faithfulness through life's storms and praying for my next call and the congregation I would serve. The river was much calmer that day and although I was weary from the demands of

ministry, I felt a confidence that God would once again renew my strength and I would mount up with wings like eagles – like the eagles that soar among the Alton bluffs and over the Mississippi this month and every January.

Today we commemorate the God who renews our strength and the God who was willing to enter the river of our lives, to step into the muddy banks of the Jordan, and to be baptized into a ministry of healing and justice. Today we are reminded of the character of that ministry and invited to immerse ourselves in the same call that we too may be among those in whom God delights.

The lectionary's choice of the Suffering Servant passage in Isaiah 42 alongside Jesus's baptism in Matthew 3 sheds light on Christ's identity, purpose, and call. The Servant's role in Isaiah is to bring justice to the nations. The baptism of Jesus in Matthew initiates a ministry of justice, inaugurating a reign where the hungry are fed, the thirsty are given drink, the naked are clothed, and the sick and imprisoned are visited. Early in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus invites his followers to join him in this very mission. Matthew's account of the baptism story is not to be read simply as Jesus' call. God delights in all who seek justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

Today, as we commemorate Jesus' baptism, remember our own baptisms, and reaffirm our baptismal covenants, may we be strengthened in the living of our lives, renewed as the Holy Spirit descends upon us, and welcomed among the children in whom God delights. Amen.