

A Baptism of Our Lord 1.12.20

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17; Acts 10:34-43

Focus Statement: God is with us.

It's Baptism of our Lord Sunday this morning, so we'll get to baptism eventually. But 2020 feels like it's started with a rush. I read a commentary on Isaiah this week that gave me hope in the midst of this, so I want to start us out with Isaiah. Juliana Claassens, Professor of Old Testament at the University of Stellenbosch in South Africa, characterized Isaiah as "a map of hope for disoriented and dislocated people at risk of losing their bearings." I read that and found myself taking a deep breath, thinking, "a map of hope is exactly what I'm searching for right now."

"So," Claassens asked, "how does a prophet go about talking to people who have been completely traumatized by seeing their city destroyed, their family and friends killed or taken away in shackles to a foreign land and who even feel that God has deserted them?" What Isaiah gives us here and throughout this book is a variety of images to help us see God in new ways, and thus see God with us in the midst of unexpected chaos, tragedy, and fear. God in Isaiah is both a mighty warrior who will deliver God's people and a shepherd who clutches the little lamb. God is a divine warrior and a woman in labor. God is a highway in the desert, God is water in the wilderness, God is that wilderness flourishing. God is sight to the blind, God is light and life to those in dark dungeons. God is the bruised reed that will not break, the dimly burning wick that will not quench. In contrast to the image of God depicted in the psalm we read, which another commentary I read described simply as

“loud,” here we see quiet, steady persistence. This one “will not cry or lift up his voice,” yet neither will he “grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.”

First off, as one who, as you know, is not one to raise my voice, I found great comfort in this idea that there is a place and a role for quiet, steady, persistence. That justice can, and in this passage is, established not by the mighty but by those whom God has “called in righteousness... taken by the hand and kept... [and] given as a covenant to the people.” But more than that, Claassens went on to note “the remarkable thing we see in this text is how the people who have been traumatized are called not to do the typical human thing of what has been called “circling the wagons”... in Isaiah 42, the prophet offers a vision of the world in which an individual or a group of people in the midst of brokenness, in spite of brokenness, or maybe because of brokenness, will be a light to the nations.”

This passage, and Claassens read of it, is hope for me in two ways. First it says that we do not have to be mighty and powerful to be the ones God takes by the hand to do justice. We do not have to be the ones who have never been knocked down, who have it all together, to be “called in righteousness.” Claassens even quoted the great theologian Leonard Cohen, “Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything, but that’s where the light gets in.” And second, the message of Isaiah to the people of its time and to us is that in the midst of the most difficult times, in the midst of the times when things feel the most out of control, the most broken down, when we feel the most helpless, God is still with us. And not just with us, God is moving us. God is leading us, guiding us, moving us out, not just for ourselves but for the sake of the whole world. I don’t know about you, dear people of God,

but this promise of hope and the transformative power of compassion was, is, a message I need in this time where I feel so little power and control.

Which brings us to Matthew and the baptism of Jesus. The passage opens with Jesus coming to John in the wilderness to be baptized. This is important because it demonstrates Jesus' control over the situation. By having Jesus travel all the way from Galilee to the Judean wilderness in order to be baptized, we see the first sign of the upside-down nature of the kingdom of God. In Jesus' baptism by John we see Jesus define his identity in submission to another. Jesus maintained control by placing his ministry in the hands of another. John's mission was to baptize and bear witness, Jesus came to John in the Jordan in order that John might fulfill that mission. Dr. Eugene Boring called this a "literary preemptive strike." Given the current state of world affairs, Dr. Boring's description struck me because this preemptive strike of Jesus' is so unlike the definition of a preemptive strike I'm used to. Now, this is not to say anything about the necessity or benefit of any military action. There are certainly times and places in which preemptive strikes are necessary to save lives and prevent worse violence. But the very nature of a preemptive strike is a move to retain power, and in Jesus' preemptive strike we see a move to share power. This is a very different definition of power. This is the "power made perfect in weakness" that Paul will talk about in Romans, when Jesus the sinless came to be baptized "with water for repentance," before taking his place as the one who will "baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire."

John himself questioned this move. Now wait a second here Jesus, “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.’” Let me read that again, “for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” As we saw with Joseph righteously going against the law and refusing to divorce his wife, righteousness in Matthew’s Gospel is about being in right relationship with God, it is about living in the way God has revealed even when that way of living goes completely against the religious, social, and cultural expectations of what it means to be righteous.

Jesus’ baptism is a fulfillment of righteousness because in Jesus’ baptism God is revealed. In this moment we see the heavens opened, the Spirit descending like a dove, and a voice from heaven proclaiming “This [this one, this one right here, This] is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, and at his baptism, Jesus’ identity is made abundantly clear.

And baptism for us too is a fulfillment of all righteousness, because in our baptism our identities too are made clear. In the waters of baptism we bear witness to the death of Christ, which takes away the bonds of sin and death that separate us from God and the declaration that with Christ we too are resurrected, we are made new, claimed as God’s beloved children. In the Acts text, Peter declared “We are witnesses to all that [Jesus] did both in Judea and Jerusalem” and in baptism we too become witnesses to all that God has done. That, as an aside, is why we baptize infants in the Lutheran church. We baptize infants because baptism is not a choice we make, it is a promise God makes to us. In

baptism, God says, this is my child, my beloved. This one can never be separated from me. The promise that God made is true whether you chose to be baptized as an adult or whether someone chose for you as an infant. Because the act of baptism is God's declaration to us.

As Peter declared to Cornelius and his family, we have been chosen by God as witnesses to this good news: That God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone is acceptable, everyone is welcome, everyone is a part of God's family. As Isaiah declared to the people of Israel so long ago, so it is declared to us today. "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by 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 prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name... See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them." Dear people of God, you, we, are the ones God has called, through the waters of baptism, to be light to the world. So do not fear, persist, for God "will not faint or be crushed until justice has been established in the earth," and we are the ones God has sent to do it. Thanks be to God. Amen.