

Sermon for 1 Epiphany, Year A
January 12, 2020 – Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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Finding Hope with Isaiah, Salvation with Jesus

I have always profoundly cherished the voice of the prophet Isaiah especially in making the journey from Advent through Epiphany in year A of our lectionary. Right from the outset of Advent we hear this prophet set in dialogue with Matthew's gospel... the prophet announces that the Lord will teach the people so that God's beloveds will walk in his paths. And not only that but even as the prophet describes the transformation of the landscape itself from parched to verdant, from waste to beauty, the hearts of God's people will also be transformed so that "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks..." and then Isaiah commands God's people, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

So, my friends, here we are in the season now of growing light having marked the "longest day" as light grows all around us. From the first words as it were in a song of praise, proclamation, and power, Isaiah offers hope in the midst of despair, light in the midst of darkness, peace amidst the ravages of war. God's vision, as Isaiah describes, is one of God's persevering presence, of the power of God's redeeming Love, not as some far off transcendent Power but as the Emmanuel, God with us - the Divine who becomes as one with us, to redeem even what seems unredeemable.

This holy season of Epiphany is a proclamation of hope. Hope that is hope, not merely optimism as Sr. Linda reminded us last Sunday. Hope that speaks of faith in our Creator who indeed is bringing such newness, such redemption, such transformation forth, even now, even when we cannot see it clearly, or if at all.

God knows I need that Divine vision held up before my weak eyes and strengthened before my fainting spirit. It is just plain hard, hard, hard, if not seemingly impossible to hear the cries of a hurting, despairing world suffering with the Creation itself, in quaking earth and fire-swept landscapes and keep believing. It would be all too easy to slip into despair and stay put. To give up on ourselves. To give up on Creation.

But this prophet keeps repeating to a people who know something about exile, suffering, slavery, hunger, wandering, pestilence, and blight... I am in the cloud and I am in the fire. I will feed you in the landscapes that are wildernesses, and I will lead you on a path that is called "The Holy Way." (Isaiah 35:8)

In Isaiah's song, every note struck becomes a part of a symphony of redemption where deserts blossom, and the once devastated landscape erupts in blossoms of beauty and newness of life abounds. I invite you to dare take God's vision of abundant life to heart. To live out of that place of hope, Divinely given hope that dares to live right here, right now in the very midst of devastation with a conviction of faith that demands from us to live as those who are called as Reconcilers and Healers in the world.

Today, Isaiah's text places before us a portrait of God's Servant- in whom justice is executed not by force but in tenderness.

Here is my servant 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... a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly lit wick he will not quench...

This is the song of a Servant Leader, one who protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and keeps gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own. That is the true Source of God's justice.

This is a vision I want our children to learn to trust, and grow into and so become Servants of that vision. Just as you and I are called to be servants of that Divine vision even now we teach them how to move in the light and love of Jesus. I pray that our children and youth will find in us, a spiritual family. A family who sings the songs of love, the songs of hope, and prays the words of assurance in the very face of the challenges of our own day and times.

There is an unabashed love and a spirit of intimacy as Isaiah speaks of God gifting the Servant with God's own spirit... God breathing into us a spirit of peace, hope, and love. And God breathing with us when we can hardly breathe on our own... in finding that "peace that passes all understanding", the peace of Christ, always and abundantly available to us.

It is on this Sunday as we listen to this Servant Song of Isaiah that we also celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. And we learn in Matthew's early verses that there is some resistance from John to this baptism. Jesus knows John's resistance and reassures him that this holy baptism is also for Jesus, a fulfillment of his destiny, his mission. This text marks the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry- a ministry of joining, of expanding to an inclusive and diverse community of faith. God's mission in and through Jesus the Christ is to break down the walls that divide, to protect the weak, and liberate those who are oppressed. That is Jesus' mission and that is God's mission for the whole of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Years ago, when I was in Divinity School, I read a passage from a book by John Snow, then a professor of Pastoral Theology at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I was so moved by how Snow presents Jesus in such a way that we can relate this text to our own day:

When at the baptism of Jesus, God spoke and said, "This is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased" it is as if God is saying to us: If you want to know who I am, if you want to know what deeper reality and truth really are, if you want to understand what I have created and why, and why I have created you, look very closely at the piece of history this baptism begins... Look closely at this Jewish peasant standing here. Keep your eyes on Him and the creation within which he moves. See how he addresses the sick, the lame, the blind and the deaf. See how he relates to those deemed outcasts of his day and those judged as sinners. Listen to what he has to say to his enemies, to his persecutors, to the religious and secular authorities. Notice how he uses his time; what is important and what is unimportant to him. See how he loves and cares about the children. ... Notice his courage when he is afraid. Notice that there are things that make him angry and pay attention to what they are. ... And pay attention to how he dies, how his fear of pain and death do not stop his expression of love and concern for his friends and family. ... But above all, continue to pay attention when he dies... for you will notice how much this Jesus is a beloved child, just like you. ... Just like you.

Today, on the feast of the Baptism of Jesus, we need this reminder... this reminder that Emmanuel, God with us, ***is still with us.*** We need to be reminded that just as the waters of baptism flowed down over him and he was sealed by the Holy Spirit, so are we. We need to be reminded that just as Jesus was sent forth from the river Jordan and was himself, sorely tempted, so we are never alone in that experience. And above all, we need to be reminded that we share in Jesus' own belovedness, not in spite of who we are but because of who we are created to be... yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Fellow Reconcilers, Healers, Lovers of Jesus, just as Jesus lives, dies, and is raised, as God's faithful serving Son, so the Christian community is to practice and proclaim his Way of Love in this time and season. We, like him, are the Beloveds of God called to be servants of Love just like Jesus.

I pray that in this season of growing light that by our very way of life, we can proclaim the Hope we find in Isaiah and the Salvation that is ours in Christ Jesus. May we live the desire we sing:

I want to walk as a Child of the Light, I want to follow Jesus.