

Baptism of Our Lord January 11 2025

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

It feels pretty bare up here, doesn't it. Almost empty. Like when you step into that new house or dorm room for the first time. Wondering, pondering how you will fill it up. What character it will have. It's always fun to see what those spaces look like after some time. How they take on and (sometimes) shape the character of those who live there.

This is similar to the situation that the Israelites are facing in Isaiah 42. They are returning home after a lengthy exile in Babylon. Coming into a land that they had only dreamed of, not knowing yet how to live in it. Perhaps eager to see how their lives will be shaped now that they had returned to what God had promised to them.

But, in many ways, they aren't coming into a bare space waiting to be filled. God has already arranged the furniture, painted the walls, picked the curtains and sheets. God says in our reading today, here is your identity. Here is your future.

And, as theologian and scholar Walter Brueggemann says, it is not a self-indulgent future. Looking out for their own best interest. Instead, "Liberated, the restored people are given a new mandate, to be God's servant people in the world, in order to

establish God's well-being in the world. The new, restored people are to do what the people in (the previous 39 chapters) failed to do: Justice."

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my spirit delights." (42:1) "Here is my servant" The Israelites would have heard this as referring not to an individual, but to all of them collectively. We've talked about this in the past. That the faithfulness (or not) of Israel is a collective thing, a ya'll thing, not an individual thing. So, too, this identity as servant of God is one that the whole nation is called to by God...not just some people in it.

How, then, has God "decorated" them for this calling to which they have been chosen? God's spirit has been placed upon them. That energizing, animating force of God that sustains life, brings wisdom and skill, that empowers people in following God's way. Has been placed on them. And the core mission of these servant people is to bring forth justice in the nations. Justice- Mishpat in Hebrew. This isn't only about the courtroom, but involves creating right relationships between people and with God. This justice is focused on ensuring "dignity, security, and well-being" for the weak (widows, orphans, the poor, the marginalized). The mistreatment of whom was the cause of their exile in the first place.

How does the servant do justice? The text goes on to tell us. Not by being bold and brash (he will not cry or lift up his voice), in fact... they will be careful- especially of the vulnerable (a bruised reed he will not break and a dimly burning wick he will not quench).

Instead, the servant will faithfully bring forth justice- enact it. Do it. With no chest thumping or advertising. With care, knowing how powerful it can be. Bring forth a restorative justice that makes sure everyone has enough based not on our understanding but on God's teaching, God's torah.

Why Israel to do this? Is it because they are special? That they have done something that God considers worthy? We talked about this a bit last week. And we see it clearly in this text... it is Israel just because God chose them.

Listen to the language in the text. It is God who has called us, God who has taken us, God who has given us. It is God who is the I AM, that makes all this possible. Not Israel. They are chosen because God chose them. Period.

And Israel are to be a light to all nations. To open their eyes to the truth of who God is and who we as humans are. To free them from the darkness of dungeons they don't even know they are captive in. Captured by their belief that they know right from

wrong. That they can see clearly. Discern truth. The very trap that ensnared the Israelites and led to their exile.

The Israelites called by the God who has shaped the land and the people. Filled them with God's Spirit that blew across the chaos of the void and brought order and beauty to it.

And God has set loose those same people to extend God's justice, God's order, God's beauty across the nations. Not through force, or being the loudest and brashest voice in the room shouting down all other. But by shining so brightly, doing justice so clearly, everyone will be drawn to them. By being the very thing they call others to be.

Today is Baptism of our Lord Sunday, a day in which we meditate on the story of Jesus' baptism in Matthew and our own bathing in the waters of baptism.

And I am struck by how similar these experiences are- our baptism and what the Israelites experienced when they returned to the promised land.

For most of us, when we come to baptism as infants we are as open and full of possibility as that new house or dorm room. And just as God did with the Israelites, when we cross through the waters into the promised land. When God calls us and takes us by the hand, God gives us our identity. And our mission in life.

Our identity is one chosen by God. Why? Because of something we have done. No. Because God chose us. Why? Because God loves us. Because we are God's beloved creation.

And in these waters God says you are my beloved child. Fearfully and wonderfully made. With you I am well pleased. And, just as it did on Jesus, God's Spirit descends on us. Fills us. Calls us. Takes us by the hand and gives us a mission.

A command that is like that of the Israelites. One that Paul shares with Cornelius. That we are to preach to all nations, to bear witness that Jesus is God come among us. To bring us God's justice, God's righteousness. That in Jesus we see God's glory.

A mission to bring forth God's justice to all nations. To all people. Near and far. Not through being the boldest and brashest in the room. Not with reckless abandon. Careless of who and what we harm. But with care for those bruised by life. Those who perhaps find the wick of their own faith burning dimly.

And this mission and calling and our faithfulness to it are measured not by the "success" of any individual. Because we all know how miserably we would fail at that measurement. Because what one of us can be all of that all the time? What one of us can do all of that all the time?

No. God calls us to faithfulness together. In community. In the Body of Christ that is the church. How, together we can be faithful. Together, we can do justice. Together, we can make sure that the hungry are fed. The naked clothed. The stranger welcomed. Together, we can be reflections of Jesus in the world. Shining his light like a beacon, so that it would draw forth those who didn't even know they were living in darkness.

In baptism, God has decorated the room of our lives. Not in every detail- we are not stamped from the same mold. But in identity. Beloved child- fearfully and wonderfully made. In purpose. Go proclaim God's justice and peace in all the world- and use words if you have to.

So that, in God, we might have what God has desired for us all along. Love, peace, joy. All found in Jesus- God come down to us. And through the waters of baptism through which God has claimed us.