

The Baptism Of The Lord – Keli Pennington

Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

As many of you know, Willem and I were married about 6 weeks ago and, as all newlyweds do, we have started the process of creating our new life together, combining old traditions and creating our own. Our first married Christmas was no exception. Willem has always had a real Christmas tree and I never have, so we got one, keeping with his tradition and creating a new one for me. The new tradition I wanted to start was to keep our tree and decorations up until Epiphany, so as to follow the Christian tradition and find new meaning in celebrating the time between Christmas and Epiphany. So, we took down our Christmas tree yesterday—just kidding, our Christmas tree died weeks ago, because I had no idea how much water those things drink up.

As I took down the rest of our Christmas decorations, I felt a twinge of sadness that the Christmas season had officially come to a close. As I thought about it, I realized that it wasn't Christmas per se, but rather Advent that I was already missing. The themes and Scripture passages of Advent do what they should—they fill my heart with anticipation, longing, and hope. But reading today's passage from Isaiah brought back to my heart and mind that sweetness of Advent. This is the first of four passages called the Servant Songs, and many of the classic Christmas passages from Isaiah surround them. The Servant Songs, or rather, poems, describe the call and work of God's most faithful servant who brings justice and light to all the nations, not through power and might, but as a suffering servant.

Now, it is easy for us to read these passages and quickly identify Christ, and rightly so, but the work of the biblical prophets wasn't fortune telling or predicting the distant future, it was first to prophecy to the present or near future. In one of the other Servant Songs, Isaiah 49:3, Israel is specifically named as the servant, and in Hebrew versions of today's text, rather than *my servant*, it says Jacob. Clearly, in the passage's original context, Israel was God's chosen, His beloved that was designed to bring justice and light to all nations. They were able to take on this mantle, sometimes; but as the Israelites would have read this or rather, heard it, this passage would have served as a source of encouragement and understanding for them as they made sense of their relationship with God and their role in the world, as well as struggled to understand the suffering of their exile. But, as the Lord states in the last verse of today's passage, *the former things have come to pass* (that is, Israel's time as the suffering servant) *and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them*. God reimagines and reinvents the suffering servant as the perfect Israelite—one that can complete in perfection the prophecy of the suffering servant in a way that Israel couldn't. Christ clearly fits the description and today's lectionary passages help support it.

To quickly just point out a couple of similarities: first, he has the presence and blessing of the divine. We see the first verse of Isaiah 42 echoed in the Father's words after Jesus' baptism: *this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*.

Second, as also mentioned in the first verse of Isaiah 42, the Spirit is upon him, as signified with the dove at Christ's baptism.

Third, Christ is the epitome of light of the world mentioned in verse 6. He literally opens the eyes of the blind, sets people free from illness and bondage, both literal and spiritual, and leads them to an abundant life.

Fourth, he brings justice and light to ALL the nations. The inclusivity of Christ's ministry and salvation speaks for itself but is emphasized by other passages, such as today's reading from Acts.

Fifth, Gospel justice is not issued by the force of a king or even by the God who breaks the

mighty cedars of Lebanon, as described in today's psalm, but rather by a humble servant in a manner than couldn't even blow out a flame that was already fading. Jesus was not the militant king that the Israelites expected; he was the suffering servant, the Lord of all that came into a fallen world to serve both the rich and the poor, and ultimately die for them.

Now, both ways of viewing this Servant Song are rich in meaning and truth, but when God said He was doing something new, He wasn't kidding. This wasn't just a slight change like a yearly release of a "new" iPhone; the life and death of Christ was something more grand, more loving, more grace-filled than our wildest dreams.

The question I have begun to wrestle with is this: when God whispers that sweet word of hope and anticipation to us, that He is doing something new, are we ready to receive it? Do we sit in satisfaction that God has fulfilled the original promise and that's good enough, that anything more is unnecessary? If we would have said that about today's Servant Song, we know what we would have missed out on. Do we say the same thing when it comes to procedure? Do we find ourselves hesitant to accept or even recognize when God is providing us a different way to act, operate, or worship?

Today's Gospel message illustrates for us God's readiness to do something new as well as our human hesitancy to embrace it. We see John initially hesitate to baptize Christ, and don't we almost want to agree with him? It doesn't seem like the "right thing" for John to be baptizing the Son of God. The roles seem backwards, but it wasn't backwards or improper, it was simply a new way springing forth. Jesus reassured John saying, "It's okay, we are doing something good, something righteous, something new. This new way is how all righteousness will be fulfilled. This is the upside-down kingdom."

And when John consented and Jesus was baptized, the sky split open and there was a voice from heaven. This used to be interpreted as a sign of the prophets, but at this point in history was now interpreted as sign of the last days. They were last days indeed, but not in way the Israelites had imagined. It was simply the end of an era, not of the world. The kingdom had come, but on earth as it is in heaven.

What a gift it is that God promises us something new when we would be satisfied by the old. His track record is perfect; when He shows us a new way, it is for our benefit, although it may not always be easy. But are we receptive to it? It seems that we are good at liking the newness that the God Who Was brought to us, and look forward to the newness of the God That Is To Come, but what about the God Who Is? Are we looking for how the God Who Is is doing something new? What newness is He currently breathing into this world and into us?

Perhaps it is through revisiting our commitment to racial justice. Peter's revelation about the inclusion of Gentiles in the covenant—awesome; abolishing slavery—great; Civil Rights movement—another great step; but the promise for racial equality has not been completely fulfilled. There is still work to do.

Maybe God is moving to restore His physical creation. There's no doubt that the world He entrusted to us is groaning with the strain that we have selfishly put upon it. We've taken strides to find clean energy sources and recycle, but that cannot fully fix the problem or reverse its effects. There is still work to do.

Or perhaps, especially in this time of political transition, God is pushing us to reengage our civic duties. Maybe voting isn't enough when the government alone cannot fix the problems that

plague our city, our country and our world.

There is still work to do, but we know that God is moving! Take a moment right now to ask yourself: how, specifically, do you sense God moving in these situations? Or, in what other areas in our lives do we see Him actively working and moving and drawing us in? These are questions that probably can't be answered in just a couple of minutes, but rather take constant reflection and discernment. And as we start to discern where God is leading, we know that it probably won't always be the most convenient way for us, but also recognize that following and embodying the suffering servant never is.

You know, thinking back to Advent, it's tempting for me to cling to the "warm-fuzzies" and excitement of the season, but God calls to me, saying, "Come with me; Advent was great, but I am doing something new, something even better in this next season." Why should I stay at the manger when I know I am called to walk the road to Calvary?