

## Sermon for Sunday, January 8, 2017

### THE WEIGHT OF WATER

Isaiah 42:1-9 / Matthew 3:15-17 / Acts 10:34-43

I am sure this has never happened to you, but sometimes I tend to ignore it when someone else tells me what to do. Especially, when I don't want to acknowledge that the other person has a point. It gets a little trickier a second time around, and then, when the third times rolls around I know I had better pay attention. I simply can't ignore the other anymore and have to engage what I am told if I want to continue to stay in relationship with that person.

So when the prophet Isaiah tells the Israelites, when he tells us—not once, not twice, but three times—that God's servant “will bring forth justice to the nations,” that “he will faithfully bring forth justice, “ and his servant will not stop “until he has established justice in the earth” in all but three verses, we know we had better pay attention. It's as if the ancient prophet wants to challenge us, saying, “Get it? Get it? Get it!”

If that were not enough, our two New Testament readings for the day keep hammering away on the same issue. When Jesus comes to John the Baptizer to submit himself to John's baptism and grumpy John balks at Jesus' preposterous request, Jesus says to John: “You have to do it. I stand in a long line of Israel's kings and that's what Israel's kings are called by God to do: they are called to work for justice.” And then the apostle Peter preaches to the people of Jerusalem in the Book of Acts: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is just is acceptable to him. You know the message God sent ... peace and justice by Jesus Christ. He is Lord of all.”

God's insistent demand for justice puts today's day in a new light. Last Friday, we celebrated *Epiphany*, the coming of the divine light into the world in Jesus Christ. Today, we remember Jesus' baptism, and along with it we remember ours as well. The church throughout the ages has always maintained that in our baptism, we are made members of God's household of faith, that we are washed clean from our sins and receive Christ's love, forgiveness, mercy and grace. We still assure everyone who comes to this font here at *Ladue Chapel* of these ancient promises. They are trustworthy and they are true. We are indeed God's forever. However, I think *we* have become too much the focus in this sacrament. *We* are made members, *we* are forgiven, *we* are saved. But what about the other? What about God, the Divine Other who grants all these precious gifts? What about our neighbors? What about those who seemingly oppose God, and us?

All three texts today, Old and New Testament alike draw our attention away from ourselves and toward the other. Neither Isaiah, nor Jesus in Matthew, nor the apostle Peter let us forget what the sacrament is in the first place. Baptism is an ordination. It is a call and a commission by God who claims us as God's own in order to send us into the world to work for justice. Jesus knows this, because immediately after he is anointed by John and God's Holy Spirit, he is led into the wilderness to be tempted by the adversary. Baptism is not for the faint of heart. When we leave the doors of this sanctuary, there, too, are lions and tigers and bears waiting for us. Oh my! The good news, however, is that we do not have to face these alone, that God in Jesus Christ is indeed with us.

But what does it mean, concretely, to work for justice? What do Isaiah and Jesus and Peter want from us? The obvious answer is the standard answer. In *The Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures*, working for justice is the main task of Israel's kings and it means to take care of the

“poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.” In the *New Testament*, the *Apostolic Writings*, Jesus tells his disciples to invite the “poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” to the heavenly banquet. Different wording, same difference. God’s message is consistent on this point. No ands, ifs, or buts.

However, justice in the bible is even bigger than that. Justice is work toward peace, with the world, with one another, and with God. Call it “shalom,” call it “the Kingdom of God.” Jim Wallis, founder and editor of the magazine *Sojourner*, has a good handle on biblical justice: “Justice,” he writes, “most simply means putting things right again—fixing, repairing, and restoring broken relationships. And doing justice restores our relationship with God and makes our worship authentic.” Needless to say, we have a long way to go and will never run out of things to do when it comes to repairing relationships. In our own lives between parents and children, friends and partners. In our churches. In our city, In our nation. And between the nations. Now, I don’t know if I read any of this correctly—if “correctly” is even the appropriate term here. I think, though, that I read the texts responsibly and faithfully. If that is indeed the case, then I want to ask you, what this feels like to you? What does it feel like when I say that baptism is an ordination toward justice? To me, it feels “weighty.” I remember when I knelt down on these steps here on the day of my ordination, as some of you will in a little while. I remember people coming forward and laying hands on me, and I felt so heavy and I thought: I will never be able to get up. I imagine Jesus groaning under the same weight as he stepped into that “river of no return” to submit to John’s baptism. I imagine Peter with a lump in his throat as he calls the people into peaceable relationships with all nations. Can you feel it?

And yet ... the “weight of water” is not heavy in the sense that it holds us back. The “weight of water” grounds us in the knowledge that you and I are members of a long line of saints called by God to work on God’s behalf in and for this world. The “weight of water” reminds us that our baptism is an ordination, and our ordination a baptism into God’s desire for the healing of all that is broken. The “weight of our baptismal waters” grounds us in the love of God that will never let us go. It grounds us like the weights tied to the ropes of the majestic hot air balloons in the annual *Forest Park Balloon Race* to keep them earthbound. And once we take flight, like those grand balloons, the “weight of water” all of a sudden feels ... light.

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Baptism of the Lord, January 8, 2017