

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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Baptism of the Lord
Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9

The Way of Gentle Justice

As 2016 turns over and 2017 begins, it doesn't take great powers of observation to detect the anxiety in the air. And even Christians, who affirm faith, hope and love as the three virtues of those who follow Christ, can find their anxiety turning into fear and anger. In winter's dark and cold, we need a renewal of our faith, hope, and love. So we remember the baptism of our Lord, the sign given to inaugurate Christ's ministry on earth.

As 2017 begins, the anger and contention of the election season haven't abated. One morning this week I noted that our local paper, which generally likes to feature feel-good, human interest stories, had four articles on page one. Every story was about some contention, some antagonism somewhere. Locally, they reported a dispute over a building contract which has escalated to a lawsuit. At the state level, the two parties were gearing up to fight over the budget. Nationally, the headline reported political leaders were "hardening battle lines" over health care legislation. And the fourth story featured our president-elect "challenging intelligence agencies" over international hacking. Less than two weeks after Christmas, and not a single story told of peace on earth, goodwill to all.

And these were all real news stories, not fake news.

Do we Christians live in a fantasy bubble, talking about faith, hope, and love? Or can Christ's way really be at work in our world?

Reading the Bible can help us gain perspective. This isn't the first time that the mood of the world has been discouraging. In Jesus' day, the Roman Empire ruled with an oppressive hand, occupying Palestine with a powerful army and collecting exorbitant taxes which kept most people in poverty. You could be angry, but there wasn't much room for changing the way things were. In Isaiah's day, national identity had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Half the people were living in forced exile in Babylon, while the other half were struggling to replant their decimated fields and rebuild their war-ravaged city.

In both situations, the urge to retaliate, to fight, to challenge and to use the same sort of strategies as the enemy was present. In Jesus' day, the party of the Zealots was ready to lead the charge and overthrow the Romans. In Isaiah's day, we don't have a biblical record of who was advocating for an uprising. But we do have Isaiah's voice, speaking for the alternative way, which is evidence that human nature probably hasn't changed much. In all likelihood, there were advocates for revenge. For fighting fire with fire. My way or the highway.

But it was the alternative way, the way of achieving justice through gentleness, which shaped Jesus. He began his ministry not with a show of power, but with a symbol of submission, going under the water like every other repentant soul. What did Jesus have to repent? John protested. Nothing. Yet Jesus was baptized to show his acceptance of his role as God's servant. The writings of Isaiah about the vocation of God's servant have helped Christians understand Jesus since the first century, when the gospel writers described Jesus' ministry using Isaiah's words and images. Professor Stephanie Paulsell writes both, "Jesus took the shape of his ministry from the images, symbols, hopes, and visions of scripture," and "The author of the Gospel of Matthew found in [Isaiah 42] a prophecy about the life and ministry of Jesus." (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 220*) Isaiah illuminates Jesus for us even as he guided Jesus in living out his vocation.

It was a vocation of pursuing justice. The Hebrew word *mišpāt*, justice, is at the heart of Isaiah's message. It represents so much more than the execution of laws and punishments we think of first when we think of "justice." *Mišpāt* begins with God and extends to the universe. Scholar Paul Hanson says, "*Mišpāt* is the order of compassionate justice that God has created and upon which the wholeness of the universe depends." (*Isaiah 40-66*, Interpretation series, Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995, p. 42) *Mišpāt* comes from God and is the work of God's servant, to bring forth justice, to not grow weary before establishing justice in all the earth, from coast to coast. But even with a vision so broad, this pursuit of justice has an eye out for the small, the weak, and the vulnerable. The boots of soldiers trample over vegetation, but God's servant won't break a plant with a nick in it, a bruised reed. Tyrants rule by snuffing out the hopes and dreams of common people, but God's servant preserves the light of a flickering candle, a dimly burning wick.

This is the way Jesus takes. He is baptized. And then he establishes justice—gently. He heals lepers and blind persons, those possessed by demons and those who were paralyzed. These were the bruised reeds of a time when such afflictions pushed people to the margins and made them outcasts. Matthew tells us in chapter 8, "This was to fulfill what had been spoken through Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'" (Mt 8:17) Jesus teaches and preaches "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers," and even "blessed are those who are persecuted." (Mt 5:3-10) His words brighten the dim candles of hope held by people who long for peace and righteousness. And when his peaceful alternative way offends the authorities, he submits to their earthly justice (which of course is not true justice) and is mocked and scorned and executed. Yet at the moment of his death, the voice heard at his baptism, when God said, "This is my Son, my Beloved," is ironically echoed by a Roman centurion who says, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

Truly, God's servant brings forth justice not by force, nor coercion, not by the execution of political power and might but by compassion and gentleness and humility. Truly, this is the way God is at work in the world even now. And truly, if this is the way of God's servant Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son, then it is the way we who wear his name are also called to follow.

It seems that some of us have it easier than others in following this way. It must be very hard to follow this way in the halls of statehouses and Congress and on the world scene, and it seems naive to think that compassion, gentleness, and humility could last for long in the competitive world of business and commerce. Yet I know that we have had political leaders who stood up for justice even at great risk to their careers, and I am certain that there are business people who make decisions which sacrifice opportunities to grow their personal fortunes because their decisions are for the common good. The way of compassionate justice, the way of faith, hope, and love are possible in this world. We cannot claim Christ as Lord and give up our trust in his way. There are too many bruised reeds out there who will die if we join the trampers! There are too many dimly burning wicks who will give up without some help!

Perhaps you have heard that our nation's recent rise in anti-Semitic activity has reached our great state of Montana. Neo-Nazi leaflets have been dropped in Missoula, a swastika was painted on the rims above Billings, and in Bozeman, an MSU student was targeted before the winter break. Most threatening of all is what has been happening in Whitefish, where a man who considers himself the "father of the alt-right movement" has his headquarters. Little has been reported in the mainstream press because the Jewish community in Whitefish has asked allies not to feed the hatred with publicity. But individuals have been targeted, a white extremist rally has been threatened, and the Jewish

community is understandably frightened. The national mood of antagonism surely has emboldened those who thrive on bullying and scapegoating. We are living in dangerous times for bruised reeds, those vulnerable “others” who are being blamed for any number of ills.

But that means that we are also living in times which give us opportunities to live out our vocation as Christ’s followers, the servants of God. The rabbi in Whitefish writes, “The last several weeks have been difficult for us, but they have also reminded us of the essential goodness of our Montana neighbors and our fellow Americans. We have been truly overwhelmed by the outpouring of support we have received from individuals and organizations around the country. We are especially grateful for our wonderful neighbors in Whitefish and the State of Montana, who have stood by our Jewish community here in the Flathead Valley every step of the way.”

Thankfully, it seems evident that Christians and others aren’t leaving the establishment of compassionate justice up to Jesus. The Spirit of God, that spirit of righteousness extended to all the peoples of the earth, is being shared as a light to the nations, just as Isaiah described. For the vocation of God’s servant is the vocation of us all—to establish the compassionate justice of God through gentleness and peace. These are times which call for precisely the advice of the book Dan and I are beginning to study with adults in the church this week. The advice is the title, *Do Not Live Afraid*. You can join the adult Sunday school class to study it with Dan, or let me know what weekday study opportunity works for you. But **do not live afraid**. Live as God’s gentle, justice-seeking servant. Like Jesus.

There’s plenty of work to do. And just like Jesus, in our baptism we’ve been named God’s beloved, and God’s Spirit has been given to us to do God’s work.

I’ll end with a portion of a reflection which I quoted in a December sermon, words which have taken a strong hold in my own life.

Someone you may not have noticed is waiting
longing for healing, for justice, for hope.
Let the light that is dawning for the world
dawn in you.
Let that light grow and radiate.
Bear it with you through the day.
You will meet someone who seeks grace,
who longs for a sign of hope.
And for them
you will be the one.

(Steve Garnaas-Holmes, Dec 6, 2016, www.unfoldinglight.net)