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"Well Pleased"

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

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 42:1-9

Isaiah spoke of the birth of the Messiah. In chapter 42 he speaks of the task of God's chosen servant: bringing justice to the nations by his own suffering. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 42:1-9

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 3:13-17

Jesus' cousin John was in the river Jordan calling people to repent and be baptized. Jesus comes to him to be baptized as a sign of his solidarity with humanity, something which John balks at initially. Will you please stand for the reading of the gospel from Matthew 3:13-17?

Reader's Digest reported of a baptism in Scotland in which the minister, holding the infant in his arms at the font realized, to his dismay, that he had forgotten the baby's name. He racked his brains and ended up asking the baby's father, who was standing next to him. The father whispered, "Spindona."

Thinking this name a bit odd, but realizing that people are choosing names that are often non-traditional, the pastor went ahead with the baptism, christening the girl Spindona.

As he did, he was surprised to see a look of consternation on the parent's faces. Back in the vestry, he was even more surprised when the mother burst into tears and the father angrily demanded to know the minister's intent with such a ridiculous name.

"But you said her name was Spindona," protested the minister.

"Ah did not," fumed the father, pointing to a piece of paper attached to the baby's gown. "Ah telt ye her name's pinned oan her!" And so it was – her name was Carol Elizabeth.
1)

Remember how as a little child you lived and loved to get the approval of your parents? Piano recitals, school plays, science projects, Christmas and Easter pageants - all were at the same time fearful and fun. But for you to feel like you'd really accomplished something, it took a parent, one of your grandparents or that "special someone," watching and cheering, applauding and effusing "great job," "well done," "bravo," an "I love you." Or "I'm so pleased?"

If the praise of our imperfect human parents could bring such a sense of satisfaction to our childish hearts, think how much more the affirmation of our Heavenly Father would mean. The absolute best thing we can ever know in life is that we have lived in such a way that it brings God great pleasure. 2)

When Jesus was baptized he heard his heavenly Father say, "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus responded to John's question as to why should he be baptized with, "to fulfill all righteousness." To "fulfill all righteousness" is to be in alignment with the will of God. Both John and Jesus' identity, character and purpose are fulfilled in this baptism when heaven opens up and God speaks and the Spirit descends. Duty and destiny come together when Jesus stands on the side of the river with sinners and submits to baptism and John, uncomfortable and unworthy, baptizes him in the waters of the Jordan. 3)

Today we celebrate the ministry which we all share with Jesus as the people of God. Today we also set apart for particular ministries one of our sisters and two of our brothers to the office of elder. These that we are setting apart have already demonstrated their discipline and their ability to work hard. However, it is wise for us to remember that discipline and hard work are not the most important marks of ministry. Instead, what is moving in the lives of these candidates for ordination and installation - and what is at work in the lives of us all - is the power, God's power, to shape and create the reign of God on earth. It is the power, God's power, poured into our lives at the moment of baptism and confirmation ... and ordination, and then sustained daily by the living grace of God.

These days, the very word "power" both excites us and disgusts us. There is so much lust for power running through the halls of power that one wonders if the finite human ego can survive it all. As Christians we have a tendency to frown on the word "power," and have focused instead on Jesus' special concern for the powerless. And yet, power, which comes from the Latin word posse, means simply "to be able." It is the birthright and need of every human being to be powerful, to be able, and to experience both significance and influence. And power, when rightly understood, is at the very heart of the Christian gospel.

Following the resurrection and before the ascension, the apprehensive disciples ask the risen Lord, "What will become of us when you are gone?" And Jesus, predicting the Day of Pentecost, answers, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth." It was only after these words that Jesus left his disciples, confident that his power to save would continue to be expressed through the faith and ministry of a living church.

Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism is nothing more and nothing less than a public affirmation of Jesus' very personal and very potent power. It is important to note, for all of us who are not being ordained this morning, that Jesus was never ordained to ministry. His baptism served as his ordination. It was the single moment when he was named and set apart, so that he could use God's power in him in very particular ways.

When Jesus comes out of the waters of the River Jordan, the skies open and the voice of God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." These words are taken straight from the most hopeful prophecies in Hebrew Scripture - words straight from the Isaiah text which we also read this morning.

Jesus' baptism then is a baptism of public power - publicly witnessed and corporately experienced every time we baptize, every time we commission, every time we ordain every time we install officers within our own community of faith the hands of the community become the hands of God, passing on the power of the Holy Spirit, passing on the gifts and the ability to use these gifts, passing on the power to become God's presence on earth.

By quoting Isaiah 42, Matthew indicates just what kind of power Jesus is receiving - what Christian power was and is and continues to be. First and foremost, Christian power is servant power - power fully and emphatically embraced so that it can be fully and emphatically given away.

Isaiah's words were first written when Israel was still in exile - without land, without influence, without hope. It would have made sense for Isaiah to pump the people up with images and encouragements of a powerful future - a vision of military and political might when the enemies of Israel would be crushed and destroyed. Instead, the image of power that the prophet presents is an image of powerful service - the gracious and life-affirming power of justice and liberation and freedom given away to others. God says, to Israel as well as to each of us, "You are my servant, I chose you, I will uphold you, I will put my Spirit upon you. And, when you embody my power through servanthood, then you will become my delight."

Christian power is also gentle power. The servant described in Isaiah "does not cry or lift up his voice, a bruised reed he will not break, a dimly burning wick he will not quench." The servant uses strength and authority not to control others, but to heal gently and release the power of life around him.

Finally, Christian power, as embodied by Jesus and described by Isaiah, is persistent power - power that does not grow faint, cannot be crushed - power that even a cross and a tomb cannot destroy - power that even 2,000 years of troubled, fainthearted Christianity has not been able to extinguish. It is power that permeates and inspires and nourishes life long after one's personal power is gone. 3)

The bruised reeds and dim wicks have the Beloved Son on their side. The Son who submits to baptism will also submit to death, coming up from the water and the grave for the sake of the unclean, underdogs, Gentiles, prisoners, Pharisees, Sadducees, Soldiers, Peter James, John, Thomas, Judas and all of God's fallen, yet beloved, world. This is who our God is, how radically our God loves and how far our God will go in order to establish justice and show mercy.

Brothers and sisters, this day as we remember the blessings and power of our baptism, as we set apart brothers and sisters for particular tasks of ministry, I pray that all of us will continue to be God's delight - powerful, gentle and persistent servants - pouring out our power for the hope and nourishment of the world.

Some of you may have seen, maybe even firsthand, the black and white video footage of the civil rights marches in the sixties. Martin Luther King often at the front received his share of stinging high-pressured water hoses. Rev. King once remarked that he and the

other marchers had a common strength. He put it this way, as "we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were a Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water."

Next weekend we will have an opportunity to show that we know water. Saturday night some of us will gather here to celebrate the life of one of our pastors the Rev. Wendy Bailey whose baptism was completed on December 20, 2016. Next Sunday night, I'll be part of a concert at Pinecrest Presbyterian in Houston dedicated to opposing violence and supporting victims of violence. That same night some of our congregation will be attending a service at the Mt Rose City of Refuge Church of God in Christ in Crosby. The service is in honor of the memory of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. They will also be honoring our church for our work with the Food Pantry and our hosting Habitat for Humanity and Meals on Wheels. A week from tomorrow there will be a parade in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I've participated in this parade for the last 2 years on my bicycle because I couldn't walk it. This year I plan to walk. People will begin gathering at 8:30 a.m. and the parade will start 10:00 a.m. at the Impact High school next door to our old campus of First Presbyterian and will conclude at the Town Square on Texas Avenue around 10:30 with a gospel concert. I will be participating in the concert as well.

You and I know water. We've got peace like a river and joy like a fountain and love like the ocean. It is by water that we share in this common symbol, this initiation, this rite, this power of God over the deep and often raging chaos of life. We know water! Our baptism unites us. It also brings us back to the basics.

Forty years ago a Philadelphia congregation watched as three 9-year-old boys were baptized and joined the church. Not long after, because they were unable to continue with its dwindling membership, the church sold the building and disbanded.

One of those boys was Tony Campolo, now author and Christian sociologist at Eastern College in Pennsylvania. Dr. Campolo remembers: "Years later when I was doing research in the archives of our denominations, I decided to look up the church report for the year of my baptism. There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there. Then I read the church report for 'my' year: 'It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children.'"

Now, not everyone who is baptized grows up to be a Tony Campolo or a Seminary professor like Bert Newman. And while we might not go on the mission field like Dick White, we all become missionaries through the water of our baptism because, that water is the water of life. That is the water of our ordination as followers of Jesus. 5)

Remember Jesus' baptism. Remember your own baptism, and then go forth and demonstrate the difference those waters make, not just for you, but for all of creation. Go forth and live a life that moves God to say again and again about us, "This is my beloved with whom I am ... well pleased."

Let us pray, God of all times and all places, as the calendar flips from one year to the next we are profoundly grateful that while you are always doing a new thing, your character of loving kindness remains constant. As we review a year's worth of events in our lives and in the life of the world, we confess to sometimes questioning your wisdom, power and, yes, even goodness. We can't help but lament inconsolable losses. We can't stop from asking, "Why?" in the face of violence, destruction and death. We can't keep from wondering, "How long, O Lord?" We often pray, "I believe, but, Lord, help my unbelief."

Trusting that you do not reject us when we question, doubt and grieve, but instead meet us where we are, embrace and comfort us, we share with you the past year's greatest hurts, sorrow and suffering. (Silent prayer.)

Almighty and gracious God, it would be unfaithful of us not to also look back, rejoice and give thanks, for there have been many instances of grace, outpourings of mercy, flickers, even brilliant flashes, of light in the darkness. Help us remember and be grateful for the times we have been forgiven despite the evidence of our guilt. Keep us ever mindful of each person who has cared for us, helped us or encouraged us. Don't let us forget the ever-present beauty that surrounds us: the beauty of creation, of artistic creations, of the people made in your image. May the harvest moons, melodies of music, rhythmic movements of dancers and prophetic words of poets inspire us to share the gifts you given us for your glory. We give thanks for the life of Wendy Bailey, whose baptism was completed and whose life we will celebrate this coming Saturday evening. We give thanks for the life of Dorothy Johnson and lift her family in prayer this week as well.

Believing that you equip those whom you call, we boldly ask to be bowled over by the wind of the Holy Spirit. We pray that the Spirit's flame will burn away our dross, illumine our paths and shine so brightly in us that we might be the light of the world we are called to be. Silence in us any voice but your own as we seek to discern your will for us in this time and place. (Silent prayer.)

Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, gather up the fragments of last year, bless them and use them in ways that will nourish your children in the year ahead. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son and our Savior. Amen.

- 1) CSS Publishing Co., Inc., Points With Punch, Vol. II, by Dennis R. Fakes
- 2) Leonard Sweet ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations,
- 3) Jill Duffield, "Looking into the Lectionary" Presbyterian Outlook
- 4) Susan Andrews CSS Publishing Company, Inc., Sermons For Sundays: In Advent, Christmas, And Epiphany: The Offense Of Grace, by Susan R. Andrews
- 5) ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Drink Deep, by Billy D. Strayhorn