

“A New Center”

Sunday, January 8, 2017

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

 **Isaiah 42:1-9 (NRSV)**

The Servant, a Light to the Nations

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.

He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard
in the street; a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he
will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has
established justice in the earth; and the
coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and
stretched them out, who spread out the earth and
what comes from it, who gives breath to the people
upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[MESSAGE]

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

It is the day on the church calendar when we usually talk about Jesus coming to the Jordan River to be baptized by his cousin John.

It is also the day when we reaffirm our baptismal covenant each year, to be reminded of what we profess to believe.

It is appropriate to celebrate this day at the beginning of the year.

We are already thinking about new beginnings and starting things fresh.

Remembering our Baptism reminds us of the new creation that God created in us through Jesus.

This morning we are also hearing a word from the prophet Isaiah to help us make a connection between God's ancient work and our world today.

God has always sought to be the center of our world.

When we look at the design of our universe, we notice that we revolve around the source of our light – the Sun; it is **not** the universe that revolves around **us**.

This is a metaphor for our relationship with God.

Let us pray...God, this morning we come to your word, longing to know how to keep you at the center of our lives. Teach us today, Lord, in Jesus' name, we pray. **Amen.**

Isaiah is writing to a fractured nation.

Many of the leaders have been forced into exile in Babylon.

The rest of the nation is scratching out a living in the homeland.

The “exiles” are doing OK, *under the circumstances*; they are permitted to do business and participate in the local culture.

The community left behind, however, is frustrated in the aftermath of a war that devastated their land.

Marauding armies, raiders, and vandals have plundered the land, leaving the people little to work with.

For both groups, there was a sense of spiritual desolation, as they began to believe that their God had been defeated by the pagan gods of conquering nations.

They wondered if God had the power to protect them, or even care for them.

The prophet comes to stand in the empty space that once was the center of the community's life; the space where they once thought God was.

The challenge for Isaiah is to restore a sense of Center to his people who are devastated by war and captivity.

They are cut off from their sacred stories of inspiration, tradition, and faith.

Their ancient covenants appear to be broken.

Living as a "*family of faith*" within the family of nations has given way to living in foreign, secular cultures and letting go of ancient practices of holiness.

I think we should realize that people in all times and places may experience this same type of "*loss of center*" during times of spiritual crisis, depression, and sorrow.

It's a struggle to keep God at the center when we feel hopeless and completely off-balance.

Hope springs from a sense that a Center is present;
but hope may be hidden amid difficult
circumstances.

For Isaiah, finding the Center means holding onto a
conviction about the character of God.

We come to this text in search of hope, in search of a
new center for lives that may feel a little out of
balance these days.

As we move through a world that is changing
rapidly, we may find it hard to stay focused on
the center; it's often like trying to catch the
brass ring on a carousel that is moving too fast.

Isaiah speaks to us about God who gives us a spirit of
strength and purpose.

We hear about God's longing for justice in the
world and our call to righteousness.

We are given the promise that God leads us and
keeps his covenant with us.

We are reminded of our call to serve God's justice
in Creation: "*all who live on earth*" are

intended to be in right relationship with God and with one another.

Isaiah spoke to a fractured nation; a people in conflict.

Today, there are many fractured nations and many people in conflict.

All around us are signs of intolerance and people treating one another badly.

Isaiah reminds us that God's promise of love, forgiveness, and healing is for *“all who live on this earth.”*

For Christians, Isaiah makes a connection between the God of Creation and Jesus, the suffering servant.

We are able to hear words of hope that lead us to reaffirm our covenant relationship with God through our baptismal promises today.

God placed the Spirit upon the Servant Jesus so that he might breath the Spirit into us as well.

We need to understand that God's plans for us cannot be achieved through our efforts alone; we need God at the center.

God has made an investment in Creation through the work of servant people throughout history.

Israel received from its prophet the same gift that the Church received from Jesus – the revelation that the God who creates is a just God who restores sight to the blind, freedom to the captives, and grants strength to those who serve.

This is the same proclamation the Church makes to the world.

“See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

God has given us a new center to focus our lives on: the hope and strength of Jesus Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**