

Baptism of our Lord, Isaiah 42, 2020

Once again, a number of the women in our church enjoyed a successful, not to say, raucous, White Elephant Party this past Tuesday. Of course, what happens at W/ELCA stays at W/ELCA, but I will say this much, that the party nearly derailed when Delores had to hurry to the ER for an ultrasound to determine if she had a blood clot that needed medication. She learned this about an hour before she was to host this festive party in her lovely home. Thanks be to God, Delores is on the mend, but this caused a significant amount of turmoil amongst the rest of the women gathering. Phone calls were made, we changed the location to the church, we set up tables and chairs, and in the end, all went beautifully. But as we gathered to pray before our potluck meal, the words that spontaneously came to my mind were: “God, one of the most important things in life is how we deal with Plan B. Thank you for being with us in this Plan B, and in all of our plan Bs, because Plan As don’t happen very often.” And isn’t that the truth? Most of us are well beyond plan B, actually, probably on Plan M or P by now. So very rarely does everything work out optimally, and so very rarely are we, corporately or individually, operating at 100% efficiency, wellness, and health. Just doesn’t happen. In any venue. Take football. Those of watching the playoffs are well aware that while every team dreams of having every single key player available for every key game and play, that virtually is never the case. Especially by this time in the season. And every player, of course, wants to be at their very best for big games, but that isn’t the case either. Concussions, sprains, broken bones, the flu, mental health distractions, all kinds of things prevent that from happening. And not just in sports, but everywhere. I’d wager that’s true even for us as a congregation. How often do we have every single member here who wants to be here, and all of us at 100% in terms of health and well

being? If that's ever happened, I must have missed that Sunday! I don't think I'm at 100% today, are you? Phil and I often hold up our just recharged cell phones and say, "I'm fully charged!" But it's a joke that applies only to the phone, never ourselves, and even the phone immediately begins to lose charge. Let's face it, it's an imperfect world and we are imperfect world participants in this imperfect world. Corporately, individually, we are broken, weary, worn, distracted, preoccupied, worried, and just not the perfect people and the brightly shining lights for Christ we would like to be. Turns out that's not a problem; it's simply reality, and God has a plan. A plan B. In fact, even God operates out of less than perfection in this broken world, as our Scripture lesson from Isaiah reminds us.

We already know from Scripture that God's original plan A didn't pull off, when humanity fell from grace from the very beginning, in the story of the Garden of Eden. Since that time, the Old Testament scriptures chronicle God's efforts with various plan Bs and so on to find a way to make things right. Laws are given. Prophets are sent. Mighty miracles are performed. But here in Isaiah 42, we see God utilizing a different kind of Plan B, a new approach for dealing with the brokenness of the world and humanity, and it's the approach that will carry through all the way through the birth of Christ and beyond. It's the approach of vulnerability. It's the approach of accepting suffering as part of reality and working through that to bring down those powers of darkness that seem so mighty and overwhelming. The chapters of Isaiah from chapter 40 on present to us the Suffering Servant----the presence of God in one who will be wounded for others, who out of vulnerability will overturn the powerful, who even in suffering can change and redeem the world. At the time of these writings, in the 6th C. BC, the nation of Israel might have seen itself as a corporate suffering servant of God, struggling in exile and defeat to keep the

faith. Through Christian eyes, we see these words as messianic prophecies, pointing to Christ, who comes in the weakest and most vulnerable form possible, a human infant, in the event of Christmas. And because God, God's self, takes on vulnerability and less-than-perfect life, so God understands our own vulnerabilities, our weaknesses, and our lives full of plan Bs. God says of this Divine Suffering Servant in our lesson, "A bruised reed, he will not break, and a dimly burning wick, he will not quench." Looking around, Isaiah sees a world full of bruised reeds that look on the point of breaking; he sees dimly burning wicks in candles that seem on the verge of going out altogether. And I have to say that over 2500 years later, I believe this vision still holds. Don't you look around you and see an awful lot of bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks? Aren't so many of us feeling bruised and near a breaking point, whether it's our hearts that are broken or we just have too many balls to keep juggling them in the air or we deal with bodies that are not anywhere near fully charged? Aren't so many of us feeling like our candle wick is burning rather dimly right now, with forces of worry or illness or grief threatening to snuff out that little flame altogether? And if the God of the galaxies was in fact to walk in upon us in our brokenness, might we not fear that before that majesty and power of God, the bruised reed will finally break and the flickering flame be extinguished altogether? Not so, God assures us here. The God who embraces human weakness, who becomes for us the Suffering Servant of Christ, moves purposefully, but gently and respectfully, among the bruised reeds and flickering flames of this broken world.

And this same Suffering Servant has a servant's heart when it comes to the condition of this broken world, the whole struggling creation. Three times in the first section of our lesson from Isaiah we hear of how this Servant will bring *justice*---in one instance we read, "He will

bring forth justice to the nations”, and in another we read, “he will establish *justice in the earth.*”

Both the state of the nations and the state of the earth itself are of concern to this Suffering Servant, and in both realms, God looks to bring justice. This is a vision long in the coming, no doubt about it. The earth still seems off balance, as earthquakes strike Puerto Rico and wild fires devour Australia. The nations seem far from living in justice, as strife between ourselves and Iran increases, and immigrants and refugees still look for safety, and we hear about sex trafficking in our area in this month of Sex Trafficking awareness. Justice for the earth, justice for nations, justice for individuals is not easily attained. And yet it is the desire of God’s heart that it come to be. And no matter how long it takes or how often there is failure, God finds new ways to work towards justice, through us, imperfect and broken though we may be. Listen to these words of commission in today’s lesson: “ Thus says God, 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.” Oh my word. Really, Lord? Doesn’t that seem to be setting the bar pretty high for us? People who are far from fully charged, who never reach 100% and who are constantly looking to adapt to the next Plan B? But all of that means nothing, because God doesn’t change the world through perfection and might, but rather through vulnerability and a willingness to sacrifice or suffer. This is God’s signature style. We see it in the birth of a poor peasant baby as the vehicle for Incarnation. We see it in the use of death on the cross as a means for Redemption. This is how God operates. Not through strength and perfection, but through vulnerability. Mystic and songwriter Leonard Cohen has written, “Forget your perfect offering. There’s a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.” Not a

bad summary of the heart of the Christian faith. All of those cracks in our bodies, hearts and minds are places that the light of Christ can come in to warm us, encourage us, enlighten us. Perfection isn't needed, nor is 100% optimal performance capacity. Bruised and dimly burning though we may be, we are just what God needs to continue to work towards justice in the earth, among the nations, among people. We don't have to be so afraid of, so paralyzed by, our vulnerability and all that is less than perfect about us.

I wonder if we could really accept that truth, if it might help us with the oh-so-common human syndrome of holding off on doing or trying something until the arrival of the perfect moment. Phil and I hesitated to take our European vacation last September, because we wondered if we should hold off until we had a better picture of our financial picture, following his retirement in August. So glad we didn't wait until we knew we had the perfect moment. Everything we postpone because our health isn't good enough, our finances aren't secure enough, our hearts aren't fully mended enough, our minds aren't free enough from worry or preoccupations.....do they ever happen? It doesn't have to be that way; we don't have to be fully charged and perfect to be or do things effectively, either for ourselves or others or even for God. God works not only around but *through* vulnerability and imperfections. Like Cohen said, "Forget your perfect offering. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." We don't need to fear so much our cracks, vulnerabilities and brokenness. God doesn't break bruised reeds or extinguish dimly burning wicks; God works to mend the broken reed and to fan the flickering flame. The Suffering Servant is purposeful, but gentle, in using vulnerability to change the world. These words assure us of that.

And these words end on a note of hope, on a promise appropriate to the beginning of 2020. “See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” The former things have come to pass. The past is past; it is what it is. But God even now brings the new into our lives, it springs forth, even for us who feel inadequate and unworthy. Congregationally, we trust that. We did new things last year. We renovated a kitchen. We tried a new kind of self-funding. We baptized 4 new babies and received 8 new members. We began a new confirmation program for teens and a new Kid’s Connect program for our older children. On Monday a group meets to try and discern where God calls us in this next year and the next several years to come....because God does new things within us, around us, and often to our surprise. Not because our pews are filled with perfect people and we are corporately perfectly positioned to respond to God’s calling, but because we are the bruised reeds and the dim wicks of God’s own heart, and God has worked through us before and continues to do so, with delight. God loves this congregation! Have you noticed? God is crazy about us, who knows why?

That crazy love is expressed for us in so many ways, as a congregation, as individuals. Today it is expressed for us in the renewal of baptism we may shortly experience. As Jesus was baptized, he heard God affirm, “You are my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” We receive a similar affirmation in our baptism and in the many times and ways we experience a renewal of that baptism. If you chose to come forward at that time, the sign of the cross will be made on your forehead with baptismal water and the words from Isaiah 43 will be spoken, “I have called you by name; you are mine.” The emphasis on calling us by *name* in that verse and in the sacrament of baptism is all about that particularity of God’s love. God loves everyone,

yes; but God loves you, in particular, also. As one female clergy colleague pointed out, her husband doesn't embrace her passionately and declare, "I love all women!" He declares, "I love you!" And they're not actually the same thing at all, are they? God not only loves everyone; God loves you, me, each of us, distinctly, particularly. That is evident in these words from Isaiah; it is evident in our baptisms; and it is evident this morning as we renew our baptisms. This renewal has nothing to do with our having finally reached that optimal fully charged moment, but has everything to do with our being bruised reeds, dimly burning wicks, working on plan B at best, and yet---still loved with enthusiasm and passion, by God. Still empowered by God to be lights, to be agents of freedom and justice. Still promised by God that something new is coming our way in this New Year. And that God will bless us through that to be a blessing to others. Amen.