

The First Sunday after the Epiphany – The Baptism Jesus – Year A – January 12, 2020  
The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony  
Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

Our Gospel today begins with Jesus coming to the river Jordan to be baptized by John. Imagine the scene, they are out in the desert, away from Jerusalem and there are huge crowds who have come out to see John. Jesus quite unobtrusively comes through the crowd, perhaps with a few disciples. He gets to the riverbank where he finds John baptizing. Jesus asks John for baptism and after some hesitation and a show of humility, John agrees. A peaceful and idyllic scene. What we do not hear today is the few verses that come before our reading this morning. Those few verses are far from peaceful and idyllic. Listen to the words of John. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Not quite the peaceful and idyllic prospect that we imagined earlier. John saw one path to God’s kingdom but Jesus modeled a very different way. John spoke of fire, burning, chaff and threshing floors, all somewhat violent descriptions of what was to come. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God in terms of healing, hospitality, generosity and love. To which way does God call us. Violence and force or patience and compassion.

They are both ways of obtaining justice and both have been used throughout human history. All three of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity have had their advocates of forcible conversion and their proponents of non-violent transformation. Which is most faithful to the way of God? Or in more theological terms, how is the Kingdom of God to be more fully realized? The question brings us back to the reading from Second Isaiah which we heard a few minutes ago.

The reading is one of four poems called the Servant Songs. These few verses identify a servant, somewhat vaguely who will bring justice to the nations. Who is this servant? What is the justice the servant will bring and how will it be brought? These are questions that have engaged people for centuries. Like all good prophets and prophecies, there is not one meaning nor is there one time in which the words ring true. This is a poem, to try to tie it too precisely to the specific is to violate the intention of the poet. The servant can be an individual, a group or a people who focus on the justice of God and the kingdom that is brought about by God’s justice. It is suggested that the servant is a symbol, representing different people and groups at various times, seeking to live faithfully in answer to God’s call to them. For Christians most especially, the servant is Jesus. “This is my Son the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” Those words spoken by God as Jesus emerged from the Jordan, sound remarkably like the words attributed to God concerning the servant. “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

Jesus brought the kingdom of God more fully into being and we have been called to continue to bring that kingdom into being. We don’t speak much of kingdoms in this age, there are few monarchies left in the world. Scripture uses the term kingdom as a way of reminding us that God is sovereign, the creator of all that is in the world. God’s kingdom is one of justice. God is a God who requires justice, for all of God’s creation. It is justice we are called to seek.

If we read this Servant Song of Isaiah carefully, we will discover a different kind of justice that what we might expect. God's justice is not one of trial and punishment. God's justice is one of wholeness, balance and abundance for all that God has created. It is a justice that is not handed down but a justice that grows out of mercy and compassion. Out of this justice, which the servant is called to establish, comes harmony, and good. Out of this justice comes and end to scarcity, evil and chaos. Paradise, heaven, yes, and it is what the kingdom of God can be. We are called by our baptism to be the servants who continue to draw closer to the reality of what paradise, heaven and the kingdom are designed to be. The Servant as depicted by Isaiah is a description of what human beings are called by baptism to become. This servant is an ordinary human being who has been called to accomplish amazing tasks for God. Establishing God's justice is done first by saying yes to the call and then relying on God for direction, strength and wisdom to accomplish what is to be done. And saying yes to God's call is at heart of what it means to be baptized. The justice of God which is the core of ministry is always joined with mercy. God is a God of both justice and mercy. True justice is merciful and true mercy is just. This twin ministry of justice and mercy is what characterized the ministry of Jesus that began as he came out of the water of the Jordan. This ministry is the ministry to which Jesus as Messiah was called and the ministry which was pleasing to God. This ministry of justice and mercy is the ministry to which we are all called by our baptism. Again, we can turn to Isaiah to discover a description of how the ministry of justice and mercy are realized. The servant does not shout in a loud voice, does not break those weaker, does not conquer, is not violent. The servant is a witness, who demonstrates God's justice and mercy by actions as well as words. The servant goes about establishing justice quietly, patiently, with gentleness. The servant is confident that by these means people will be attracted to God's kingdom. The servant embodies compassion and a right relationship with God. Our best example of this servanthood is Jesus. There are many who have followed this path and witnessed in this way. I want to tell you one such story. Harriet Bedell was born in 1875. She is remembered as a deaconess and missionary. In the days before women were ordained to the diaconate and priesthood, there was a separate order for women called deaconess. These women were set apart for ministry. They were trained in special schools. The emphasis was on religion, mission, teaching and hygiene. Harriet Bedell was enrolled in such a school. Upon graduation she became a missionary-teacher among the Cheyenne in Oklahoma. In 1916 she was sent to Stevens Village Alaska and served as a teacher and nurse at a mission outpost 40 miles from the Arctic Circle. She was one woman, alone and yet not alone. She received all of the gifts promised the Servant. God's spirit, strength, wisdom and power. Harriet set about this ministry of bringing justice and mercy to the people in a small village. Those people and that small village became her community. Thus, began a ministry at age 41 that would endure well into her 80's and beyond. She traveled an average of 20,000 miles per year as she went about the work God called her to do.

While in Alaska, Deaconess Bedell heard of the plight of the Seminoles in Florida. Using her own resources, she reopened a mission among those people. In doing so she worked to revive traditional crafts among the people. The sale of these items greatly improved the economy in the area. In addition, native art was preserved and encouraged. Harriett Bedell died in 1969, but her ministry, her legacy and the justice and mercy of God live on in the people and

communities she served. Harriet Bedell was a witness in a long line of witnesses, from the prophets, through Jesus to the Apostles and down through the ages to you and me. In a few moments we will go out to the font in the narthex, to renew our baptismal vows and to once again feel the water of baptism on our heads and in our souls. The promises we made or which were made for us originally bear reflection often. As we once again recite the promises, to continue in the apostles teaching, prayers and breaking of bread, to proclaim and to serve, think about the ways in which you in your life can strive for justice and peace. Think again how you are called, how it is your vocation to honor these promises which you will again renew. How are you called to bring God's kingdom of justice and mercy more fully into the corner of the world where you live? Listen carefully to hear the voice of God as you once again say "yes" to ministry in God's name. Remember too those who have gone before us in ministry, people like Harriet Bedell who said yes to God not knowing where it would lead but who trusted that it would lead to a furthering of a part of God's Kingdom to which she was called.

With God, nothing is ever left behind, nothing is ever wasted. Isaiah heard God's description of a servant for the kingdom. That description has identified many over the centuries. The servant image is most clearly fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus, a ministry that was gentle, persistent, a ministry of justice and mercy. That same work of justice and mercy are seen in the ministry of Harriet Bedell. The work of the servant, of justice and mercy continue to be fulfilled in each one of us as we live into those promises made at baptism.