

Sermon Notes for 1/8/17 (Baptism of Jesus)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Isaiah 42:1-9

Theme: THE SERVANT’S NEW COVENANT: LIFE AND FORGIVENESS

The Point: God’s Servant brings hope and life to the broken and oppressed, for in Him they find forgiveness that sets them free to live.

Introduction: Darkness and brokenness rule our world. Lying, cheating, and deception have become the expectation of many. Suspicious of the motives of others, many people find they cannot trust anyone, even within their own families. Leaders concentrate on serving their own desires and needs, while the needs of their followers become back-burner issues at best. Murders are commonplace in the premier cities of our nation. Drug abuse runs rampant in cities and suburbs. Prison populations overflow, as do the populations of refugees fleeing terror and war in their homelands. The more technology advances, the smarter the criminals become. Identity theft and consumer fraud have bankrupted many a prospective retiree. Occurrences of cancer, Alzheimer’s, diabetes and other illnesses increase and bring their curse to many. Life has become dark and broken in many ways.

Broken lives result in broken end games. How many drug overdose deaths have there been lately? Families fall apart as spouses seek their own fulfillment rather than the preservation of their relationships. Young people have given up on principles that (only a generation or two ago) were foundational to our society. Fear of the future has ruined many a relationship as people have seen no hope for improvement. . People who have lost life savings end up taking their own lives. And the more our health profession practices, the less likely we are to overcome the deep-seated issues of death. We may postpone it for a short time, but it still overtakes us all.

Illness, anxiety, fear, depression, and rootlessness take their toll on people. Death stands at the final door, the grim reaper hastening to cast its icy grip over each one of us. There seems to be no hope, no future, no healing, no light. Darkness rules. In St. John’s gospel we read these hard words: “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” People still love darkness because the light shows up their faults and failings.

And if it is true that the night is darkest just before the dawn, then things must have looked pretty bleak on Israel’s salvation radar screen 2000 years ago. Roman occupation armies kept the Jews in check. Hopes of a Messiah, brought to fever pitch during the reign of the Maccabees 150 years earlier, had practically died out except among a few faithful. The nation’s hey-days had come and gone, and it appeared that Israel would always be a stepchild among the nations. The Herod’s, so-called “Kings of the Jews,” were no more Jewish than many of us here today. Things did not look good for the light to be shining any time soon from Zion’s hill.

Right at the point of our most hopeless, God steps in and brings light and hope. He ushers in His Servant. He announces Him even in the far-flung regions of earth’s surface. Isaiah, 8th-century Israelite prophet, records the words of Yahweh: “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.” Life-changing, life-bestowing service this Servant brings to a life-hungry world.

This Chosen One was proclaimed by the Father at His baptism at the Jordan River: “This is my Son, the

Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” This Chosen One was identified by the Spirit descending upon Him in the form of a dove. Yahweh says in Isaiah’s writing that He will give His glory to no other, and yet Jesus receives that glory, authority and power. John saw and bore witness that this cousin of his carries an identity far beyond the mass of sinners over whose heads John had poured God’s life-giving water.

This One is not just an adopted child of God (as I am, as you may be), but He is THE Son, THE Beloved One, the One whose actions have all been pleasing to the Father. This is the One who needed no forgiveness, but whose willing, humble service has purchased forgiveness for every one of us. God the Father has given this One “as a covenant to the people [Israel], a light to the nations [all the Gentile lands].” Simeon had sung about this as he held the Child Jesus in his arms: “my eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Trusting the Son, the Beloved, marks the beginning of new life, life that springs from forgiveness, life that springs with hope and peace. This is true for all who have dwelt in darkness, for every prisoner who has been enslaved by his sin, for every person who, insisting upon his ability to see, has walked in blindness and hopelessness. God’s Spirit calls us to trust in the One who has come as the Servant of God. Just a little over a month ago, blowing snow and low visibility contributed to a 40-vehicle crash on I-96 near Lansing, MI. Three people died and 11 were injured. That is what happens when people keep pushing forward in their vehicles, even when they can’t see. Many people are living that sort of life spiritually, pushing forward on their own strength and initiative, even when they have no idea what lies ahead. That behavior is deadly, spiritually speaking. They need the darkness and the fog to lift.

Peter was one of those fog-lifters. He came proclaiming the message of peace by Jesus Christ, even in the home of a Gentile, the Roman centurion Cornelius. He said, “That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”

The Spirit through Peter testified to that Gentile audience (Peter perhaps even struggling with his own prejudices at the same time), “All the prophets testify about him [Jesus] that **everyone** who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” “Everyone” – there is no one who must exist outside the love and mercy of God. None are exempt from His love. No one is unqualified for His forgiveness. Everyone who trusts in this Suffering Servant finds the life and hope that spring from a forgiven heart.

Because of the Lord’s deliberate intention to bring light and hope, our lives look brand new. In another part of Isaiah’s writings (a bit further into the Servant Songs), we read these powerful words in the mouth of Yahweh, speaking to His servants: “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am” (Is. 58:6-9).

This is the kind of life that does not laugh in the face of brokenness. Rather, the heart of God’s servant breaks when we see the signs of darkness and brokenness in the lives of the people around us. Those broken hearts of God’s people move them into action. Christ’s own heart broke when He saw the hardness of heart that kept people from embracing God’s kingdom reality. He shed many tears over Jerusalem. We are called now to follow this brave yet humble servant into the future. We are called upon to reflect His light to those around us, no matter how much darkness is around. As John puts it, “The light shines in the

darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

What does that look like? What does it look like to identify with those who suffer from injustice and oppression? Simple things like sharing your bread with the hungry become signs of the kingdom of God breaking in. I love the fellowship dinners sponsored by this congregation, where community members are invited and welcomed to come and to break bread and to fellowship with us. And the fact that these dinners overflow in meals shared with the youth who are finding shelter and hope at Safe House or Rezek House – that is also delightful and encouraging!

Bringing the homeless poor into your house may be harder to do, but certainly it takes shape here with the support of CEEDS and other refugee resettlement agencies as they work to help people who are adrift among us to find some solid ground under their feet here. God’s love takes shape as your hearts break with the hurts that you see and feel in the lives of those who are fellow-journeymen with you toward eternity.

Jesus told the parable of the foolish rich man, who decided, after a particularly successful harvest, to build more barns, bigger barns, so that he could store up his riches for his later years. Of course, the irony was that on that very night God said to that man, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” It is bad to be called a fool by people. But to be called a fool by God Himself? That is the greatest tragedy one could imagine.

St. Augustine commented on this parable this way: “This silly fool of a man. . . was on the point of perishing because he had handed out nothing to the Lord before whom he was due to appear . . . He was planning to fill his soul with excessive and unnecessary feasting and was proudly disregarding all those empty bellies of the poor. He did not realize that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns. What he was stowing away in those barns was perhaps even then being stolen away by thieves. But if he stowed it away in the bellies of the poor, it would of course be digested on earth, but in heaven it would be kept all the more safely.”

The bellies of the poor are much safer storerooms than our barns, our 401(k)’s, our FDIC-guaranteed accounts. Let us not imagine that we have a better plan than God has for seeing that His gifts are well used and that they have eternal consequences. He opens His heart and His hands to us so that we might have hearts and hands that are open to the needs of those whom we meet and those whom we know.

Conclusion: God’s Servant brings hope and life to the broken and oppressed, for in Him they find forgiveness that sets them free to live. Once we have tasted God’s goodness and His mercy, then our greatest privilege and pleasure is to share that goodness and mercy with those around us who are in need of them. May that life be our privilege and our joy, now and throughout our earthly journeys, to the honor and praise of Jesus’, God’s Servant par excellence! AMEN!