

January 13, 2008 – Epiphany 1 (Baptism of Our Lord)  
Augustana Lutheran Church of Hyde Park  
Rev. Elizabeth Musselman

Texts: Isaiah 42:1-9 / Psalm 29 / Acts 10:34-43 / Matthew 3:13-17

Hymn: “When Jesus Came to Jordan” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* #305)

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Grace to you and peace from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I noticed a lot of exhaustion around me this week. Maybe it was the weather—that one teasingly balmy day on Monday when people went jogging by the lake in shorts, just enough to make us remember what spring is like, and then suddenly we’re back to the darkness and chill of January in Chicago! Winter can be exhausting. Maybe it was also the return of students and staff and faculty to campus for full immersion into Winter Quarter after a break that was just long enough to let us get used to sleeping in and relaxing, and then suddenly we’re back to work. Maybe it was also the exhaustion of the presidential candidates who dominated the news until Wednesday morning, as they campaigned until their voices were raw and their defenses were down and their fatigue was palpable.

Whatever the reason, I must have been experiencing a moment of exhaustion earlier in the week when I first read the description of the servant in today’s prophecy from Isaiah, because even while Isaiah so beautifully describes this mysterious righteous servant who has been chosen by God, I found myself getting frustrated by verse four: *He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.* These words seem almost mocking to someone who is tired, and they also seem to be just blatantly untrue, I thought. Isaiah wrote these words 2600 years ago, and justice *still hasn’t* been established on the earth, and we *do* grow faint and we *do* feel crushed, all the

time! Whatever justice means, whatever Isaiah was predicting, it didn't happen the way he said it would. Justice has not been established, and there is not a person on this earth who has never grown tired.

And it doesn't really matter who we believe Isaiah's suffering servant is—whether it's a description of King Cyrus, who graciously allowed the Jews to return to their homeland after their long exile at the hands of the Babylonians, or if the servant symbolizes a Jewish Messianic figure, which Christians would later believe to be fulfilled in Christ. Some people say the prophet's beloved servant is a metaphor for all of Israel, God's chosen and beloved people—and we might also say that this description of the servant in Isaiah prescribes the way we all should act in this world: bringing sight to the blind and freedom to the prisoners and justice to the streets. It seems like a good way to live. But: *he will not faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth?*

The problem is that no matter who the servant is, Isaiah's prophecy remains very much unfulfilled—one only needs to drive a few miles south of Augustana (or a few miles north, or a few miles west) to see with our own eyes that justice has not yet been established on this earth. Or to think about the arguments between the presidential candidates, even within party lines, and the underlying issues that make these debates necessary. *He will not faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.* Or look at your own life, and your own relationships with the people in your life, and the ways in which you fail. *Until he has established justice in the earth.* None of us knows exactly what this justice will look like when it is established on earth, but we do know for certain that justice is not yet here.

Isaiah was very good at expressing the mix of frustration and hope that characterize those who seek justice in a fallen world—this is why we read from Isaiah so much during Advent, and this is why his words still ring true for us today. In a later chapter of Isaiah, the prophet will cry out to God in desperation, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, . . . so that the nations might tremble at your presence!” Isaiah is seeking a God who doesn’t remain separate from us, but rather a God who immerses himself into our world, and who fixes things.

*Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down.* Six hundred years later, the gospel-writer Matthew must have felt the closeness of Isaiah’s vision as he described the heavens opening up at Jesus’ baptism, even though the heavens that day above the river Jordan weren’t torn open quite as violently as Isaiah had predicted. Instead of a warrior who terrifies the nations into subservience, Jesus got a dove and a loving voice from heaven—and as we know from the rest of the gospel, he won’t emerge from the Jordan River to rule the nations. We know from the rest of the gospel that Jesus will grow tired and be tempted in the wilderness and get angry and wander hungry with the disciples, and that eventually he will be crushed by the weight of the cross. But Matthew also tells us that Jesus will preach and heal and work very hard to establish the Kingdom of God and conquer death. This is a God who immerses himself into our world!

And his public ministry begins with an immersion, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins although he himself is sinless, and his first public words—in fact, the very first words Jesus speaks at all in Matthew’s gospel—are a description of his own baptism: *Let it be so now, for in this way it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.*

Like the elusiveness of the justice that's supposed to be established on this earth, there is a sense of mystery to this *righteousness* that Jesus talks about.

Just what kind of righteousness is it that would require God to take on the human condition, and live with us in this earth—this earth where people get sick and relationships fail and justice refuses to be established no matter how much we exhaust ourselves trying? *In this way it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness*. It doesn't make sense for Jesus to be baptized, but Matthew calls us to believe that Jesus' baptism somehow, inexplicably, *changes* things in the world; that there is something transcendent about the moment Jesus emerges from the waters (a moment that is frozen in time in the sketch on the front of our bulletins). One contemporary paraphrase translation of the Bible says it this way: "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism" [Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: Nav Press, 2002), p.1748].

*In this way it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness*. God comes to earth, and immerses himself so fully into the human condition that he will grow frail and be crushed—and yet, in that one spectacular moment when the heavens open and the dove descends, Jesus asks us to believe that all righteousness really is fulfilled, which is to say that justice really has been established upon the earth, even if only for an instant. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.

Jesus' baptism teaches us that God's work of righteousness finds its beginning and its ending in discrete moments—like when a child in a manger in Bethlehem cries out in the night, and when the water trickles over the infant's head, and when enemies

exchange a glance of understanding, and when bread is broken and wine is poured, and when the trumpet sounds and the choirs of angels sing, and when the hungry are fed, and when the nurse holds the hand of the dying, and when the tomb is found empty. Jesus' baptism calls us to believe that there are moments when all righteousness is fulfilled, and in these fleeting moments we catch a glimpse of the justice that will someday be established on the earth.

And Jesus' baptism teaches us something else about God's work of righteousness in our world. When God swoops down to earth as an infant, and then Jesus swoops down into the tiny, dirty river (and Pastor Gorder reminded me this morning that the Jordan River runs about 5000 feet below sea level, in the deepest valley on earth—so it really is a swooping down!)—it is in this *immersion* that Jesus teaches us about the meaning of righteousness and the meaning of our own baptism. In the person of Jesus, in the Jordan River on a day 2000 years ago, righteousness becomes a thing of immersion rather than a thing of separation. It's about crossing boundaries rather than being divided by them. It's about *jumping in* and *getting wet* as we negotiate relationships and seek to participate in the justice that God is establishing on the earth. The legacy of Jesus' baptism—and the gift we receive at our own baptism and then week after week at this table—and the hope we seek in community—it's a righteousness that we can see and taste, here and now! It's a righteousness that can sometimes be fulfilled in a single moment—at the font or the table or the hospital bed or the classroom or the office—even as we continue to observe that justice eludes us at every step. It's the righteousness of a God whose love is stronger than our sin, whose Spirit keeps us from despair even when we are at our most exhausted, who forgives us for our failures and asks us to forgive others, who calls us to

immerse ourselves in one another's suffering. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now, on a Sunday morning in Chicago, as future breaks into the present and grace floods into this world. As our hymn of the day puts it: "the hidden years have ended, the age of grace begun!" Amen.