

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17
January 8, 2023

A Consecration

I am struck by the nostalgia of Christmas, and how it feels to be caught up in the traditions; the decorations, the songs, the worship services, the family gatherings. And then how quickly, once it is all over, the sentimentality fades and in its place there is a readiness for the new, the anticipation of spring, whatever is ahead. Maybe it comes with taking down the decorations and/or watching a bowl game or two on tv, and then in an instant, everything is back to *normal*. It can be a little jarring.

At the same time, we are still only at the beginning of winter. Very often, the worst of the weather is still ahead of us, and the next two months are the bleakest of the year. That is where we are also in the annual re-telling of the gospel story.

Some Epiphany celebrations focus on the visit of the Magi, others move on to the other childhood stories; the circumcision on the eighth day, the encounters with Anna and Simeon, the visit to Jerusalem as a twelve-year-old, although these are not usually emphasized much.

Others go straight to the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River, and even some to the Wedding at Cana, the first sign in the Gospel of John. Skipping over the biggest part of the childhood, adolescence,

and early adulthood, we come to the mature part of the story of Jesus. It can be a little jarring.

The reading that caught my attention came from the book of Isaiah, it is the first of the so-called “suffering servant” passages that culminates with the 53rd chapter;

“he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought *us* peace was upon *him*, and by *his* wounds, *we* are healed,”

There are four readings in this great work of prophecy, that refer to, “the servant,” the first of which appears in the 42nd chapter,

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him . . . and will bring justice to the nations.”

And in the 9th verse it ends with, “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.”

In between, we are offered the following vision,

“I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people, and a light for the Gentiles; to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

It is a grand set of ideas and when combined with the presentation of Jesus for baptism it makes for a very powerful image, a consecration appropriate for the new year when we are almost by instinct hopeful, looking forward to what is next.

To consecrate something is to set it apart for sacred use. A Consecration is a ritual act in which such a dedication is declared, and some action is taken to acknowledge and commit to it.

For most of us, our baptism symbolizes both inner cleansing and death and resurrection, an immersion in both death and life. Upon occasion one might wonder why Jesus was baptized, after all, he was the incarnate divine Word with the power over life and death, and not in need of inner cleansing. At least part of the reason is because for him it was a consecration. It stood for the setting apart of his life for a sacred purpose. Raises the question; could our baptisms also be such a consecration?

When we dedicate a building such as this one, or a person, such as an ordination for ministry or a commissioning of a missionary to be sent out, or people such as we did today with the church officers for the new year, we set apart a little space as sacred in a world that has a great deal of profanity in it.

Our business life, our politics, even our play is consumed with it, which sometimes means that life is messy, and dirty, and morally compromised; and other times it merely means not sacred, normal, like when all

the lights and decorations have been taken down and we are jarred by the plainness of it all.

The claim of Epiphany, and for that matter the gospel, is that somehow the entire profane mess is sacred. Incarnation means the indwelling of the profane and ordinary by the divine.

The consecration of Jesus at his baptism and the association we make between him and the servant of Isaiah gives us an idea of what can happen when the sacred and profane meet, in a life so dedicated.

As we sit here in this place where we come each week to think about life's meaning and hear words from God read, spoken, and sung, and as we contemplate another year in the grand movement called life, we do well to be reminded of the kind of language that our traditions give us to describe the God's nature and is meant to characterize the way we live. Words like:

Gratitude and humility
Compassion and kindness
Justice and mercy
Sacrifice and service
And Love

It is almost a cliché to say that after 2,500 years since Isaiah, 2,000 since Jesus, the world and its people don't look new, not even with all the modern dressings. To me, even the cities seem old, dirty, worn down a little. They all look better from a distance than they do close up. How do we keep believing in the

newness of things after all these centuries? How do we, as the next verse says, keep on singing a new song in this old world?

Even as far back as the time of Israel's suffering at Babylonian hands, there is a discovery that there is only one God who cares about everyone, even those who are outside the family, for that is what Gentiles are. And it means the same thing from any perspective. Whoever the outsiders and rejected are in whatever setting. God is their God, and seeks their redemption, and lights up their way.

Let us confess that we have not lived out this calling very well. But we do desire it, and patiently await the transformation of our lives and of the world's life. Let us also consider that no matter what happens in 2023, there might be: war, economic stress, civil unrest, catastrophic weather, disease . . . or there might be growth and transformation, and delight and pleasure . . . or both; that no matter how ordinary or messy our lives may be, we are set apart for sacred purposes.

The challenge of the servant's message is to allow God's grace to change the way we view ourselves and others, to see them human, to see them beautiful, to see them loved and accepted by God, especially those who are the least attractive to us. Let this be our prayer, that by God's grace, we might be be so consecrated. What a miraculous idea?

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