

FULFILLING RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, January 12, 2020

Scripture: [Isaiah 42:1–9](#)

[Matthew 3:13–17](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURES

Epiphany is a season of beginnings... we've got the "origin story" of this Jesus character, now its time to officially meet him as he will take part in the narrative that is to unfurl for us. (As you'll notice, the baby in the manger grows up fast!)

Today, we celebrate Jesus's baptism, as an adult. It will be, for him, and for us, a beginning and introduction to all of his ministry that is to come in his life... though I always hold on to a firm belief that he always found ways to be uniquely Jesus, even if he wasn't as much in the public eye as a kid. Listen for the order that actions and words take in this short story... see what was true before, and what is true after.

Before that, we'll hear from the prophet Isaiah. Throughout this year, our gospel readings will focus on the gospel of Matthew, and you may have heard from some preacher that Matthew's account focuses on how Jesus is the fulfillment of prophetic beliefs in the messiah for Israel. Hear what things sound similar, what things might be unique about this character that the prophet tells us about... what things might be very ordinary...

Listen...

SERMON

Many of us don't remember our baptisms... for anyone who was baptized as an infant, they were a part of the celebration and blessing of our arrival in life, and so they most imprinted on the people who brought us to be baptized. I have a certificate, signed by someone I never met. I hope that each time we baptize someone here, though, there is some part of a memory I can't quite access that comes to life.

In place of this ritual that we are assured we share in with Jesus... there are all sorts of other beginnings in our lives which we ponder. We start new jobs, new relationships with colleagues, or friendships... We start new hobbies, or subjects of learning...

I was a Sci-Fi kid growing up, so I can't say beginning without saying the first line of Frank Herbert's tome, *Dune*: "A beginning is a very delicate time."

It is.

We can sometimes hesitate to actually begin... we may feel like the risks of new life or practice or connection are too much... that we don't deserve to be in this new beginning... we may feel like we could never thrive in newness of life.

How do we begin... and, since we're in church, how do we become a community of beginners... which I think is a fabulous thing to be?

This story of Jesus's baptism begins with an argument about the way blessing is supposed to flow. John and Jesus get into a little bit of the dance, you know, when you get to the stop sign at the same time as another driver and you both spend what feels like 5 minutes waving at the other person to go through? Like, maybe being magnanimous is not as efficient a system as we might expect.

Jesus prevails in the end, by saying that John baptizing him will "fulfil all righteousness." So we are left to wonder what righteousness is being fulfilled here. Does Jesus need to be baptized?

A small spoiler for me: I just don't think so. Jesus's language seems to be about something other than need... it's about something that will be for all.

I always encourage you to see yourself in different characters in the scripture stories. (I'm with you if trying to play Jesus doesn't feel very fair sometimes... either to us, or to Jesus.) Today, what we might begin to imagine is... maybe we are John... maybe the need is for John to baptize Jesus. To see that if we will serve God, we must minister to God in the flesh of another. We must do those things which seem like God could never need.

We love to have God come to us and care for us. Baptize us. That is indeed a promise and truth we find in our lives: that God is very unexpectedly, and very powerfully sometimes present with us in times of challenge, or wonder, of hope, or need... Yet we can sometimes view that as enough. There is no need for us to respond in the world in particular ways... God has it under control, or we are so powerless in the face of the world's turmoil and pain that we could never hope to respond. Even more, maybe we never have to begin... as we wait quietly for the divine starting pistol before we serve, or minister, or help, or even imagine.

What if we are meant to baptize Jesus, because of what it will say about us, rather than about Jesus?

In other words, I wonder if baptisms are for the person getting dunked, or if they are for the community doing the dunking, so to speak?

By doing so, we see what has always been true... a voice is heard saying Christ is the beloved... but this isn't the kind of verb tense that makes you think, *now* Jesus is beloved. No, the voice simply states a truth that has been, but now John, and all those folks at the river that day, and *we* hear it... and hear it plainly. Jesus is the beloved...

...and so we must be, too... beloved children of God, blessed, and washed by one another in the name of God. We fail to see it in so many ways, and we fail to acknowledge it so often in our actions, or in our inaction. In our failure to begin.

We can be so afraid to begin... The fires in Australia with the staggering scale and inertia of climate change, the knife's edge tensions of war and peace right now between our own country and Iran, the widening gap between those who are struggling and those who do not know struggle...

These all feel too large for us. I know. Sometimes, it feels like we could never hope to respond to them.

But I watch as rescuers hold one animal at a time in Australia, as each individual comes forward to ask questions, and draw us towards peace, and I watch as we bless one another, and our children, here in this congregation... naming them beloved just as that voice did all those years ago... and we hear that voice calling us to action. To continue to bless and baptize and celebrate the divine gift of one another, the Christ in one another which is so pleasing to God.

Here it is: we, this whole, wondrous creation, are beloved of God... and God is asking us to bless it. Not because God hasn't, but because when we bless, we find our own blessing, and *we end up changed*. It turns out, the grace of that first splash of water some of us share in with Jesus? It overflowed, and made a fresh start for the people who splashed and blessed us...

We see God more clearly, we see Jesus more clearly, we hear the blessing that already was. Something like a dove... before the new things spring forth in our lives, God tells us of them... through the blessing that was before we were, and the blessings we receive from those who have come before and tried to show God's love for us... may we fulfill that righteousness for others. Starting fresh. Amen.