

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
January 15, 2023 – 2 Epiphany
Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-12; John 1:29-42
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John the Baptist is an important figure in each of the four gospels. In this morning's lesson from John's Gospel John the Baptist points to Jesus and declares who he is. Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the Word of God described earlier in the fourth gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1-2). Jesus is the one on whom the Spirit descended at his baptism. Jesus is the Son of God. John is a witness to who Jesus is. John points to Jesus and John's disciples then follow Jesus. They declare that Jesus is the Messiah.

In the Eucharist and other prayers and in our hymns we often encounter the idea that Jesus takes away the sin of the world. What does this mean? Not a question with an easy answer or only one answer. But we can say something about what the author of John's Gospel means by these words. For him, sin is not about immoral or unlawful behavior. Sin means not being in relationship with God. The opposite of being sinful is being a believer, and being a believer cannot be reduced to agreeing with certain statements of belief or creeds. A believer is someone who is in an active, living, dynamic relationship with God. Such a relationship is made possible by the presence of Jesus among human beings as God – the incarnation of God in Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. According to the author of John's Gospel, it is the life of Jesus that makes our active, living, dynamic relationship with God possible. In this way Jesus is the one who takes away the sin of the world, the separation of human beings from God.

I think the role of John the Baptist as one who points to Jesus cannot be emphasized enough. You will remember that Jesus called John the greatest of all the prophets, and yet John never wavers in his declaration that Jesus "ranks ahead of him." It is the work of all of us in the church to point to Jesus and bear witness to Jesus in the world. It is the work of every one of us to point to Jesus and to bear witness to Jesus in our lives, most often without mentioning his name.

Supporting and strengthening the Baptist's role as a pointer to Jesus is the passage today from the prophet Isaiah. To grasp this more completely, we can consider the background.

The book of Isaiah covers a lengthy period in the history of Israel, and this reading comes from a time when the people had been conquered by the Babylonian empire and had been forced into exile from their ancestral land. The prophet speaks to the people near the end of their period of exile in words of comfort about their return to the land. This return will be an occasion of joy, but it will also bring for them a larger responsibility.

As a part of the message to the people, the prophet speaks in four passages of a "servant of the LORD" who represents the message, and the people, and the presence, of God among us. In the first passage (Isaiah 42:1-4), in an anticipation of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus that John the Baptist himself saw, God places the Spirit upon the servant and describes the task: "to bring forth justice to the nations."

The second passage, the one we read this morning, is where the servant speaks about the task as given by God: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." And how, we wonder, will this be accomplished?

In the third servant passage (50:4-11), the servant hints at the cost of making this salvation known: "I gave my back to those who struck me." This leads to the fourth and final servant passage (52:13-53:12), in words spoken by those who see what the servant has undergone: "He was despised and rejected ... he has borne our infirmities ... upon him was the punishment that made us whole." The passage circles back to recall for us the words of John the Baptist about the Lamb of God: "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter." The Lamb of God is one who accepts the task and the cost of bringing God's justice to all people, and of taking away the sin of the world by bringing the world – us, our community, and all people – back into relationship with God. And when we are joined with God in Jesus, we ourselves can take up the task of bringing the life and work of Jesus to the others whom we meet day by day.

The Psalm that we prayed together is a hymn expressing this willingness to take up the task that God wills for all the world: "I love to do your will, O my God: your law is deep in my heart." The "law" here is the teaching of justice and righteousness, and the Psalm's poet goes on to say: "I proclaimed righteousness in the great congregation Your righteousness have I not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance." When we pray such words, we all need to bear in mind that we are offering ourselves as bearers of the messages of righteousness, justice, peace, and goodness.

We may feel very distant from an ancient Israelite psalmist, or the prophet Isaiah and his poetical servant of God, and even from John the Baptist and Jesus, all of whom lived in historical circumstances different from ours. And we may wonder if there is a call like theirs that could summon us to do God's will. But if we look around us, we may see needs in our world, in our communities, that we can meet. And we are always called to remind ourselves and others of how we are interrelated in the world we live in today.

And we have examples in our own time of just such a call. Tomorrow we honor the life and work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. What better way to do that than by working for justice, reconciliation, and common good in our lives and in the world around us?

May the Lord help us to follow him and bear witness to his reconciling love. In Jesus' name. Amen.