

OPENING PRAYER

Gentle Shepherd, King of Love, we come to You as we are, not as we pretend to be. The truth is, God, that when we lift our heads above our path, we all too often discover ourselves lost in a maze of choices. We confess from the very beginning of this worship that we are lost. Were it not for You, O great seeker of our souls, patient parent to our childhood, joyful host to our homecoming; were it not for You, O Lord, we would be lost forever. But, because of You, there is room for us at the Cross. Gentle Shepherd, King of Love, seek and find us as we are, not as we pretend to be. Be patient with us and teach us how to wait. May the echoes of Your celebration reverberate in our midst this hour, transforming our worship from a mournful plea to a joyful song. Gentle Shepherd, King of Love, lead us. Amen.

ISAIAH 42:1-9

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope."

This is what God the LORD says-- he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: "I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

"I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols. See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you."

MATTHEW 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

SERMON: *Establishing Justice and Righteousness*

Most gracious God, bless the thoughts of our hearts and the words of my lips. Help us to grow in faith and in love that we may be pleasing to you and a blessing to others - we ask it in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

There were hundreds of varieties of superheroes in the toy stores, on movie screens, videos and books during this last Christmas season. All of them had one thing in common. They overcame "Evil" through violent destruction of the evil ones.

Walter Wink calls it the belief in "redemptive violence."

Evil must be overcome with violence.

Our reading from the Prophet Isaiah this morning looks forward to the coming of the Messiah, and it proclaims a different kind of approach, especially in verses two and three.

There it says of the promised one

He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice.

What I find most interesting in today's reading is the role the promised one will have in bringing about justice. Three times, in this short reading, His task is described as, "bringing forth justice."

Justice is a big word in this reading; indeed, it is a big word in the bible.

The prophets were the mouthpieces for God's justice, agents for God.

They were preoccupied with calling God's people to doing justice to equitable behaviour. They preached God's will as a society in which all people are treated fairly.

God, according to the Hebrew prophets, is especially concerned for those overlooked in the normal routines of the world: the poor and the weak, those not important enough to be heard or seen in the council rooms of the powerful; those who can not afford "a million-dollar defence team" to represent them in the courts. Justice is so central a characteristic to the kind of society God wants, that anything less would mean the people were not God's people. The prophets tell us that

despite all their prayers and religious ritual, without justice, God would turn a deaf ear to his people's prayer.

All in society, particularly the poor, were to be given their most basic rights for food, clothing and due process. The prophets not only confronted the unjust in society, they also stirred up among the forgotten the longing for a day when all would be made new, when justice would light their dark world.

Isaiah says that the promised one will establish justice, especially for those in most need, "***...to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and to release from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.***"

He also says that the promised one will be made a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, for those who before were not God's people.

The gospel reading today tells us that on the day Jesus appeared at the Jordan He found John baptizing those who confessed their sin and expressed a need for God's deliverance from their various forms of captivity.

Sin is a form of blindness, a kind of slavery and an absence of light.

The gospel reading today tells us the one promised by Isaiah appears to be part of this repenting and enslaved community. Of course, He had no need for the washing, He could have kept his distance. Instead, He chooses to be intimately united with them and so enters John's cleansing waters.

Jesus may be without sin, but He too is part of a people enslaved by the Roman occupation, a people living in the dungeon and darkness of a foreign power.

In Matthew's account of the baptism, the voice from heaven speaks words over Jesus very similar to the ones we heard in the Isaiah passage.

While John recognizes that Jesus has no need for repentance, Jesus says it must be done, "to fulfill all righteousness."

What does that mean?

First of all, Jesus' presence to John's baptism puts the stamp of approval on what John is doing. John truly is the precursor, truly the one calling people to readiness for the promised one of God.

God wants this baptism for Jesus, for it will be the occasion for God to announce that the promised one has come who will set things right. Justice will be established through Him, and people will be invited by Him to live in right relationships with each other and with God.

Jesus receives His commission to do exactly that this day.

The baptism of Christ Jesus is a lesser point for Matthew, the epiphany that follows is the key point, that epiphany or revelation that comes when the voice from heaven says, in word's much like the word's in today's reading from the prophet Isaiah: "***This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased***"

The voice is speaking not to Jesus. Rather it is speaking to us. Do we hear it?

Are we ready to live the just life this One makes possible for us through our own baptism?

- that baptism in which we receive the same Spirit that Jesus did,
- that baptism that makes us, like Jesus, a people beloved and pleasing to God?

We have all heard and read about the dream Joseph had.

In it he was told the true identity of the child Mary was carrying.

The child would be called, "Emmanuel, God with us."

Well, how far would God be willing to go to be with us?

Would God address sinners from a safe distance, calling us to repentance from the clouds as it were, not soiling his hands with our sinful and tired world?

Would God send still more prophets to call us to himself?

No! God had already done that many times over to no avail.

The human response to our obstinacy would have been to throw up hands in disgust and proclaim, "Enough already!" and strike us all dead. To send in the superheroes to blow up the homes of the wicked and kill all those who have worked evil.

But our God is not some kind of humanly invented hero.

Our God is completely different from us and our God surprises us not by zapping those who have sinned but by entering our flesh, taking on our human condition, by identifying with us so completely that He even goes down into the water to mix with those people who are admitting they are sinners in need of redemption.

There must have been better people praying in the Temple that day who would have been more "worthy" of a divine visitation than those at the River Jordan. But instead of going to them, Jesus is immersed in the same water that has washed over sinners.

Who can resist a God like this?

How did Jesus set things right?

How does He fulfil all righteousness?

His baptism shows us He would not use brute force to get us to be a just people; forgiven and right before God and just with one another.

Rather it shows us that He chose to move among us, winning us over to Him by reaching out to the fringe, to the outcasts, the sick, those who are sinners, and those the poor and imprisoned.

He would do this gently, since these are already languishing people who have had too much to suffer. In the words of Isaiah once again, ***"Jesus would not break "a bruised reed and a smoldering wick he shall not quench"***.

By joining people in the waters of their own predicaments, God had taken the first steps in acknowledging their importance in the plan He has to set things right; to bring justice and right relations to all people.

Jesus has come for people who are broken or like a "smoldering wick," feel depleted, about to go out.

He enters the waters, not where the movers and shakers of society meet to make deals that affect so many others, but where those who know their needs and have turned to God have gone.

They have gone out to John because they can not make it on their own. They need to hear and experience that God has heard their distress and has come to breath a new Spirit into them.

This Spirit descends upon Jesus, but soon it will descend on all who follow Him into His baptismal waters.

At the end of Matthew's gospel, as He takes his leave of his disciples, Jesus promised to be with us till the end of time.

He is still Emmanuel God with us.

He gives us His Spirit through our baptism so that we are not left alone throughout our lives to stumble along and get tripped up by sin and the unjust ways of our world.

Jesus' baptism shows us how close God wants to be with us, and our baptism establishes this closeness for all of our lives.

We gather today to remember this and to draw closer to God and to one another in his name.

We gather today to be strengthened by the one who is different from our superheroes,

We gather to worship and follow the one who does not use violence to end violence, but who instead enters into our lives in every way and transforms us, giving to us that which we need to be faithful servants of God.

Today's readings do not call us to do anything in particular. Rather they call us to understand and to know what it is God has done and will do, and how it is that God will do it.

They are a testimony from God to us about Christ Jesus, and a reminder that God has come to be with us in Him, and that He has come to help us be with God and to live in the way that God wants all people to live.

Praise be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forevermore. *Amen*

Let us pray:

Loving God, we thank You that You are always with Your children; that You watch over us and love us as we watch over and love our own children. We

thank You for how through Christ Jesus, our brother and our Lord, You shower us with your mercy and forgiveness and for how in him You provide all that we need to be pleasing to You in every way. Today we pray that all who are baptised in His name may keep the covenant they have made and boldly confess Him as Lord and Saviour. May we, your sons and daughters, be pleasing to You in all that we say and do.

Father in Heaven, You sent Your Son to be baptised among sinners, and to seek and save the lost. May we, who have been baptised in His name, never turn away from the world, but reach out in the power of Your love to rescue the wayward and to draw them to You and to the healing that You provide. Lord of the Nations, Eternal King, we pray for the world today, and especially for those who suffer this day.

We pray for the lost and those who are living in darkness that they may be touched by Your Spirit and led into the light that casts out all darkness and heals the wounds that are caused by their sin or the sins of others.

We pray for those who are hungry and those who have no home to call their own. We remember too those who are victims of war and the power of human greed, apathy, and hatred.

We pray for those who are sick, that there may be healing; and for those who are dying that they may know your comfort.

We pray for our government and the rulers of all nations, that they may rule with justice and equity and seek to bless all peoples alike with peace and prosperity.

Father, we thank You for how You listen us and grant to us every good thing we ask in the name of Christ Jesus. We thank You and we hold before You now those special concerns and special joys that are upon our hearts today. Hear now Lord our prayers.

Silence

We pray for those who grieve today; for those who suffer from cancer; for those who have family problems and need wisdom and strength; for those who are lonely and in need of companionship; for those who are suffering from this pandemic in any way and for those who are grieving the loss loved ones

We thank You too Lord for prayers that have been answered; for procedures and events that have gone well; for our brothers and sisters in faith who have cared for us and prayed for us.

Father God, we your children pray to you and give you thanks and praise through the name of your beloved Son, Christ Jesus our Lord who taught us to pray saying: *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into*

*temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. **Amen.***

BENEDICTION

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and the love of God, and of God's son, Jesus Christ our Lord. And the blessing of God almighty, The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, remain with you always. **AMEN**