

Open to God's Spirit
A sermon by Joe Hoffman
Baptism of Christ Sunday
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We hear the call – will someone please lead us. Will someone run for president that will do the right thing. That will honor the values that we hold deep. Will someone please come and show us the way.

In each age, we long for a new Servant – with a capital S. We long for God to send someone who can restore the wholeness, who can save us from the chaos and the brokenness. Please God, send us your messenger. Send us your Messiah.

This text from Isaiah 42 is one in which the Servant comes to bring hope and to restore justice. That is not the task of many who seek to be leader. But for God's Servant, the task is always to reorder the relations of the world so that justice will come for all the nations.

The Spirit of God empowers the Servant to do what the world regards as impossible. How can anyone bring equitable, trusting, life giving social relations to all the nations? Who can do this but God alone?

I know it is tempting to look for someone else to come and do this work. I know it seems far beyond our ability. And it is. This is God's realm. This is beyond the means of ordinary human beings like me and you. And yet, through the empowerment of God's Spirit, weak and ordinary human beings rise up to accomplish daunting tasks. God's reign of justice longs to break out in us.

God does not come to us as a warrior. God does not come forcing God's way. God does not practice heavy handed ways. God comes gently, carefully, caringly. God respects the weak and the fragile. Those in jeopardy. But God comes. And with God, each of us who seeks to live into the justice of God's realm are empowered to do more than we ever imagined. God intends for society to be re-ordered against slavery, oppression, and disability. God intends for all to know God's peace.

We who are Christian believe that Jesus was the Servant. The one to come. He never forced his way. He never had a military to send into battle. He never used power to coerce or manipulate. He never knew wealth. He was a poor man. He lived a simple life. And yet, he was Servant. He was the image of Images. He taught us that love is the way. He taught us that peace is possible when we choose to live in a way that respects the integrity of each person. He taught us that there is enough when we share.

The role of the Servant is to bear witness to God's justice and to trust that God will empower us to do what God calls us to do. And what does God call us to do – to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. It is to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is to love our enemy. It is to care for Earth and all that lives on Earth.

Paul Hanson, a Biblical scholar from Harvard, has said: “the Servant thus is the description of the human being whom all who love God are challenged to become.” In other words, all who love God and seek to live in the ways of Jesus are Servant. You are Servant. I am Servant. Together we are Servant.

And as Servant there are a couple things this text says we need to know. First, that the call and the strength to live this call come from God. God is the source. We are not left to our own devices but can trust in the One who calls us.

And second, the style of witness seems impossible. Not only does the Servant not become a warrior or conqueror, but the Servant does not even cry out when oppressed, does not ask for pity, does not push aside the weak in the hope of becoming strong. The Servant bears witness with quiet and patient gentleness, with compassion, with righteousness. The Servant knows that all people are empowered not by force but by love, and trusts that God’s love has the power to transform the world. And yet – don’t be fooled. This is not a weak Servant. This is not a powerless Servant. The Servant has the power to do the impossible because it is God who makes all things possible.

Jesus became Servant. And Jesus called us to follow his example. To become like him. To love, to do justice, to care. To watch out for the vulnerable and weak. To bring forth the reign of justice and peace through the way we live our lives.

When we are baptized, we commit to living as best we can in the ways of Jesus. We promise to grow in our faith. We promise to let God’s love increase in us, to practice the ways of peace, to let grace fill us so that we might embrace one another. We promise to live in the way of the Servant.

Isaiah said that the Spirit of God will come to those who are open to receiving that Spirit. That is what we do in baptism. We open our lives to the power of God. We state our intentions of living in the ways of Jesus. And today, we come to remember that again. To renew that promise. To once again open ourselves to all that God is so we can be all that God has made us to be.

I have been on this journey for almost 49 years now. I am continually drawn to reflect on what it means. I continue to seek to open myself to God’s spirit – because it seems I have an ability to keep parts of my own life and spirit closed off. I long for God, and yet I don’t want God to get too close. Maybe God understands this best of all. Maybe this is why God refuses to show God’s face – because it would be more than we could face. And yet, the call as I understand it is that we seek to know God more and more.

As we come today, we again claim the promise of our hearts – to open our lives to the power of God – and to trust that power in all things. And to live in the ways of Jesus. To hear that we too are beloved and blessed. To receive the grace that God offers. To follow where God leads us. To treat each other – including the stranger – with respect.

So today I ask you. Who are you called to be? Are you living the life you long for? Are you growing in your love of God and neighbor? Are you living in the ways of Jesus?

I am not one who calls us to the altar like is done in some traditions. But I must admit I found that important in my own growing up. To have an opportunity to come forward and once again say – God, I seek to be all I have been made to be. I want to be filled with love. I want to be forgiven for my mistakes and the times I chose to not live as a faithful Servant. God, come to me again. Open my spirit to receive more of your Spirit.

In a minute I am going to invite you to come, to dip your hand in the water again, to remember who you are. Take in the words now. You are loved. You are blessed. You are forgiven. You are child of God. You are peacemaker. You are lover. You are vessel of grace. You are beloved and with you God is well pleased.

Come remembering. Come seeking to be renewed. Come seeking to be empowered. You come as you need to come today. You offer your own words, your own prayers. You know what you need to do – whatever that is.

And hear this again. You are loved. You are blessed. You are a child of God, forgiven and free. You, Servant of God. You.

Let us sing this hymn together as we prepare to come.