

Sermon – Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9  
David R. Lyle  
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Baptism of Our Lord – Year A  
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“A Song for When All Seems Lost”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. On Friday morning, I dragged myself out of bed a bit earlier than usual on my day off. In an inversion of Christmas morning, I grabbed my cup of coffee and made my way to the Christmas tree. There were no gifts below, no stockings hanging nearby, no carols playing. Its daily donation of needles to the floor had been steadily increasing. The tree was engaged in its own version of dry January and hadn't had a drink in days. Without ceremony, I unscrewed the pins holding it in its stand, dropped it on its side, and dragged it outside. I had to do all this early to make sure that it was ready for collection by the village for its journey to the chipper. As I dumped it in our alley in the gray light of a rainy morning, I took one last look at what had been, for us, a good tree. But now it was, cold, lifeless, cutoff. And the thought I had in that moment was simple: I know how you feel, tree. I know how you feel. Cut off, the joy and purpose gone, helpless and hopeless. Like Green Bay in the fourth quarter...
2. The people of God were well acquainted with such a state of affairs, having lost much more than a football game. We find them today in exile, strangers in the strange land of Babylon, victims of the neighborhood bully who took them over because it could. Temple destroyed, homes far behind, the people wonder if this is the end of the story. Has the light finally gone out? Are they cut off forever? The prophet sings them a song, the first of the four Servant

Songs of Isaiah. And who is the servant? The servant is the whole people of God, the people of Israel. The Lord sings to the chosen, the people in whom God delights. Yes, like a reed the servant is bruised but will not break, is faint but will not be crushed, burns dimly but will not be quenched. The same God who stretched out the heavens will use the servant to bring justice to the coastlands, not to work violent revenge upon the nations but to bring them into the promise of a new covenant that will one day come. The people, far from home, wonder in Psalm 137 how they can sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? With their own voices cut off, God sings a new song to them – a song of promise, hope, and life when all seems lost. When will the servant of whom God sings rise up?

3. Perhaps you come into this space today feeling cut off, overwhelmed, wondering not just where the joy of the season went but whither to go now. The news cycle has been relentless, from last weekend's military incursion into Venezuela to the killing of Renée Good by an ICE agent in Minneapolis on Wednesday. In between these two events, a high-ranking government official spoke with CNN, offering not just his understanding of the role of government but a theological, cosmological, vision of how the world works. A world, he says, "that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time." What is striking is that there is no particular defense of this or that action, no nuanced articulation of this or that policy. It is simply a vision of a world in which might makes right and power is to be used, always, to dominate and subjugate others. To further the interests of one people at the expense of others. To be fair, this *is* too often how the world has always worked, but that is a result of our sin, not God's intention. If we live in a world governed by brute force and who can wield it best, we are left with limited options. In that light, are we left with limited questions? Less why Venezuela and more who's next? Less why was Renée Good shot to death and more when will it happen again, and to whom? If the iron laws of the world

are strength, force, power, where does that leave us? Shall we all be driven by fear to seek domination over one another? I desperately hope not. The words of the poet, Rilke, come to mind: "Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love."

4. This morning, we see the new servant come at last, Jesus, the hope of all people in our helplessness. He goes down to the Jordan and, over the protests of John, is baptized. One unique feature of Matthew's account of this baptism is Jesus' explanation that he must be baptized to fulfill all righteousness. Not because he is sinful, which he isn't, nor even to begin to address our individual sins, although that is, of course, part and parcel of his saving mission. In going under the waters of the Jordan, Jesus does so as one who stands behalf of the whole people of God, to bring them back into right relationship with God so that they – in Christ – may now fulfill their call of bringing sight to the blind nations, and with it, justice and peace. Just as this world was created by God out of the watery chaos, so now does Jesus go under the floodwaters to begin the renewal of creation. He will complete this work on his cross and be vindicated by his resurrection. And throughout his work, from the Jordan to Calvary, Jesus will make it clear that this world's ways of strength, force, and power are *not* God's ways. Jesus makes it clear that we were made for love – a love, Peter will discover later in his encounter with Cornelius, that shows no partiality.
  
5. The baptism of Jesus is the beginning of God's endgame in which creation will be reborn, put back to rights. There is a second element of Matthew's narrative this morning that is unique. Mark and Luke tell of the heavenly voice speaking to Jesus, but in Matthew the voice is for us: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." This, God tells us, is the only One to whom we can look for forgiveness and life and hope for the future. And this One to whom we look is the Lord who brings peace and love.

6. Michael Gorman writes of the cruciform nature of our baptismal faith, that we are justified “by means of God’s faithfulness expressed in love, to which humans, moved and enabled by God’s Spirit, respond in faithfulness that expresses itself in love.” Friends, in baptism we have been drawn under the waters with Jesus and find ourselves alive in him. As Jesus goes under the waters and under death for us, alive in Christ even now, so do we now in Christ give of ourselves for others. We seek not to dominate, always to serve. All is not lost. We suffer, but the song of the servant goes on. The power and the glory belong to God alone, and God’s reign is marked by love. Forgiven of your sin, go forth as bearers of the light, that all may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven, the God who shows no partiality. The God working for peace and hope and love. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.