

Sermon – “Another Beginning”
Scripture Readings – Isaiah 42:1-9
Sunday, January 8, 2017
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Springfield, Illinois

On this first Sunday after Epiphany we remember together the Baptism of the Lord and celebrate the beginning of Christ’s ministry; a ministry which reflects the character of the suffering servant announced in Isaiah 42:1-9. As we begin a new year together and reflect on another beginning and the possibilities before us to do the work of justice and transformation, let us open our hearts and minds to the word of God.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
5 Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
6 I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,^[a]
a light to the nations,
7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
8 I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
9 See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.*

Our text for today’s meditation is the Baptism of our Lord found in Matthew 3:16-17.

*And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”
Matthew 3:16-17*

The title of the meditation: “Another Beginning”

Let us pray: For another beginning we give thanks, dear God, and for your sustaining presence in all our beginnings. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

The New Year presents the prospect of “another beginning” and all the anticipation and hope for a bright future. On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we are reminded of the character of the ministry to which we are called to begin again.

One of the highlights of this New Year’s week for me was watching the movie “Pawn Sacrifice” with Peter and Paul, who is home for the holidays. This is the story of Bobby Fisher who was the World Chess Champion from 1972-1975. He was a brilliant, somewhat disturbed, young man who beat Russian player Boris Spassky during the Cold War and transformed the game by inventing a new variant of chess which randomized starting positions compelling players to rely on their talent and creativity rather than memorization.

One of the quotes in the movie which both affirms the possibilities in each beginning as well as the wonder of God’s expanding creation was an observation made by Father Lombardy, a Roman Catholic priest who was Fischer’s confidant and coach. He said.

“After the first four moves, there are 300 million options before a chess player. That’s more than the stars in the sky.”

As we move into “another beginning” and consider the options before us as well as the stars above us, let us find hope in the premises of our faith and the character of our Creator implicit in the biblical story of creation. Here we find the retelling of a well-known fable in antiquity about how the world began, however this author tells the story with a different emphasis to communicate what the Hebrew people believe about their God. There is nothing scientific about this creation story. It is a story of faith. Let there be no mistake. God is God, the foundation and creator of all of life. This is at the heart of all we believe. According to the Interpreter’s Bible Commentary:

“Since the universe began in God’s good purpose, all existence can be viewed not tragically but with trust.. Sun and moon, seedtime and harvest, earth and ocean, beasts and birds, do not belong to hostile demigods, but to the God who is made known within the heart and spirit of human beings.”

If we can trust that life began in goodness, we can go forward into life with courage and expectation. The evil in the world is not due to some relentless fate; it is a contradiction of the Creator’s purpose. God does not secretly wish ill for creation or delight in punishing us for some known or unknown wrong committed along the way. Quite to the contrary, my friends, God delights in our well being and peaceful coexistence and is glorified when our lives are creative and loving, shining brightly.

Even as we can trust in the goodness of life because God created it, we can also trust that God is present with us in the night as well as the day because God created the light and separated it from the darkness.

Although the author of the creation story hesitates in saying that God made the darkness and does not call the darkness good—the Hebrews believed the darkness also belonged to God. Not to glorify the darkness but to affirm God’s sustaining love in all of our experiences.

The fear of the dark was deeply rooted in primitive man who never knew what dangers might be lurking in the night. Today the fear of darkness is still instinctive. Our children are afraid to go to sleep without a nightlight and which one of us has not experienced a sleepless night and longed for the relief of daybreak and a new perspective with the morning sun.

To believe the darkness also belongs to God is to affirm that no human experience is without God’s presence. And so the psalmist may proclaim “the darkness and the light are both alike to you.” God is present with us in the light and the darkness—in the known and the unknown. No human experience can be so dark as to eclipse the presence of God.

When God’s abiding presence came into the world to partake in the human experience, the light of an Eastern Star announced Christ’s arrival and another beginning. This light of Epiphany, which led strangers to the Christ child symbolizes another belief at the heart of our faith. Namely, that God’s redeeming presence is intended for all whom God created and not limited to a chosen few. No human being is excluded from God’s justice and mercy.

When John, the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance for all, he was proclaiming that “all are equal in God’s sight” and equally in need of God’s mercy. It is the cleansed life, the decisive life, the life who confesses the need for God, who belongs to God.

Indeed when John preached baptism for all people he was preparing the way for the One who came for all people. When Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John it was a decisive moment in his life and a confirmation of who he was and the ministry he was about to begin.

Today we celebrate the God who was in the beginning and who makes all our beginnings possible. Today we celebrate the God who will see our beginnings through to the end and who graciously gives us new beginnings along the way. Today we celebrate the God who is present in the light and the darkness of our going out and our coming in. As we consider the options and strategies before us in this New Year that outnumber the stars in the sky, may this chess analogy offered by American Statesman and Scientist Benjamin Franklin, be a source of inspiration in the way we live our lives.

Chess teaches foresight, by having to plan ahead; vigilance, by having to keep watch over the whole chess board; caution, by having to restrain ourselves from making hasty moves; and finally, we learn from chess the greatest maxim in life – that even when everything seems to be going badly for us we should not lose heart, but always hoping for a change for the better, steadfastly continue searching for the solution to our problems.

As it was in the beginning, is now and evermore shall be. Thanks be to God. Amen.