

Possibilities Unfolding

Isaiah 42:1-9

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First Central Congregational UCC

8 January 2017

Imagine a situation where the world no longer made any sense. How you understood yourself, your personal identity. What you believed about God. How you determined the meaning and purpose of your life. All of that threatened.

That's what happened when the people of Judah were taken captive and exiled away from their homeland. An entire culture in crisis, experiencing post-traumatic disorder. And in the wake of trauma, some brilliant, creative geniuses arose, including the author the passage we read today. Here we read a song written to inspire the people to imagine a better future. Hear now these words from the Book of Isaiah:

Isaiah 42:1-9

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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

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: 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 light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

For the Word of God in scripture,
For the Word of God among us,
For the Word of God within us,
Thanks be to God.

In the first of the Servant Songs that shine out of Isaiah, the prophet offers a portrait of the kind of leadership we should expect from one called by God: patient,

nonviolent, merciful. God's chosen does not "execute justice" by force. Indeed this is a portrait of tender care—for those who are vulnerable, for ideas still coming to fullness, for small efforts struggling to plant their roots. . . . True leadership protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and keeps gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own.

So writes Harvard Divinity Professor Stephanie Paulsell.

Here is the type of song an exiled people sing about the type of leader they desire who will bring forth justice. It reminds me of a Woody Guthrie song.

As an Oklahoma boy, I'm particularly fond of Woody Guthrie, one of our favorite sons. His portrait, guitar strung over his shoulder, hangs in the rotunda of the State Capitol. His presence there serves as an ironic witness against much of the recent politics of Oklahoma, but I don't want to get into that.

Guthrie wrote songs about the Great Depression and the people most disadvantaged by the economic collapse of our country. He traveled with migrant farm workers, Okies, and told their stories. In other words, the songs of exiles. And like the songs of the ancient exiles, his 20th century songs also imagine a better, more just society. I know I'm not the only person who wishes that "This Land Is Your Land" was our national anthem.

But that's not the Woody Guthrie song which Isaiah 42 made me think of. The song that came to mind was "Christ for President."

Let's have Christ our President
Let us have him for our king
Cast your vote for the Carpenter
That you call the Nazarene

The only way we can ever beat
These crooked politician men
Is to run the money changers out of the temple
Put the Carpenter in

O It's Jesus Christ our President
God above our king
With a job and a pension for young and old
We will make hallelujah ring

Every year we waste enough
To feed the ones who starve
We build our civilization up
And we shoot it down with wars

But with the Carpenter on the seat
Way up in the Capital town
The USA would be on the way

Prosperity Bound!

I thought of this song while studying Isaiah's song because Guthrie and Isaiah both express similar frustrations and dreams of an exiled, traumatized people. These songs are efforts to make sense of the world when the world doesn't make sense anymore. They are efforts to create something new in the midst of catastrophe.

This is Baptism of the Christ Sunday, one of my favorites every year, because we profess our faith and renew our vows. I value that this Sunday comes at the beginning of the year, almost as a way of reminding us of our spiritual new year's resolutions. In our Statement of Faith we commit to:

accept the cost and joy of discipleship
to be servants in the service of others,
to proclaim the gospel to all the world,
and resist the powers of evil . . .
to struggle for justice and peace.

What are we committing to when we renew these vows and proclaim our faith? In a certain way, we are agreeing to be God's servant as presented in Isaiah 42. Let me explain.

The Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah have long been understood to speak not about a particular historical person, but about the community. In the original context, the community of exiled Judeans. When the apostles were writing the New Testament they used the language of these songs in Isaiah to describe Jesus and, thereby, the church. As part of the interfaith community of God's people, we, individually and collectively, are called upon to be the servant Isaiah dreams of. Scholar Paul Hanson writes that this passage is "a catalyst for reflection on the nature of the response demanded of those who have received a call from God."

We have all been called. During our Advent series "Remember and Dream," one Sunday we explored the "Call from Tomorrow." God is calling us into a new beginning, a better future, and calling us to be agents of that tomorrow.

Part of what we celebrate with festivity and fantasy at Christmas time is that the Christ is born anew in each of us. In other words, we have been empowered. We have to discover that power and use it.

The Biblical story reminds us that when we need that most is in the time of trauma, when we aren't feeling our best, our strongest, our most hopeful. That's precisely when our commitment to a better future is most needed.

A few years ago I read a book entitled *Reality is Broken* by the video game designer Jane McGonigal after hearing an excerpt of her TED Talk on NPR. I ended up preaching a sermon series on the lessons I drew from that book. One lesson was that she believed the world needs more people who can practice "possibility scanning," which she defined as "always remaining open and alert to unplanned opportunities and surprising insights." And she felt that skill is most necessary in moments of chaos.

I think we, the baptized followers of Jesus, should be precisely those kind of people. Our lives are not small or insignificant or lacking in purpose and meaning. We are part of God's

epic adventure to make the world a better place. We need to claim our power and take the risk. Possibilities are unfolding. Be a part of that. Do something new.

For the song says, "See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."