

“The Delight of God”

Sermon on Sunday, January 8, 2023

Dear church,

When was the last time you delighted in something or someone? Maybe it has been a while and you need to sharpen the eyes of your heart and see the good in people and the good in what’s happening around you more clearly...The texts for this Sunday speak about God’s delight in his servants, God’s delight in real human beings with flaws – people, who care about this world, people who are making a difference somewhere, people like some of our church members, frankly. Take this message from Isaiah to heart: God delights in you! A lot!!! In this text God presents an unknown person with the following words, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight.” The words exude promise and hope for a perennially struggling world; they carry messianic weight. “He will bring justice to the nations,” we are told. But we ask: who can bring “justice to the nations” except someone endowed with superpowers? We can’t even bring justice to one nation or one little county or one courthouse, and this servant is supposed to bring justice to the nations??? We’d like to hear how the powerful around the world would respond to that modest proposal...

I suggest that this servant of God has the fingerprints of the universal Christ all over him and this servant is alive to the extent that Christ is alive among the people in our world, in and far beyond the church. What comes through is God’s joy in this servant, any servant who brings justice to the nations – even if it’s just for a tiny portion of the world. And that is happening all the time, to the delight of the creator. In recent years and decades we had more Nobel Prizes of Peace go to ordinary people who had extraordinary impact in their communities; I always prefer that over the selection of publicly known figures, like politicians, and heads of states. I believe the spirit of this servant of God that Isaiah conjures up is alive in many places, in many people, and God delights in them!

Individuals whose valiant efforts were acknowledged and whose struggles for justice and peace have been highlighted by the coveted Peace Prize include Leymah Gbowee, one of the women peace activists in Liberia, (many of whom were Lutherans by the way); it

includes Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani peace activist; it includes Nadia Murad in Iraq, and it should include for future awards some of the people in Iran who have shown so much courage. Those are all individuals who live in danger because they have similar values as we do but they live in societies that are not kind to those ideas. There are many more of those courageous servants of God than we can know. The Lord delights in them.

Similar excitement is expressed in today's gospel when Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan River. What were the words that Jesus and others heard? "Here is my son whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Can you feel the delight of the Lord coming through to his beloved, through the clouds of doubt, affirming his son, giving him the green light to get ready for the mission? The language in this gospel passage is exquisite. "*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 alighting on him.*"

Too often our heavens are closed. Too often we have a very cloudy picture of God. Too many times, because the heavens are closed for us, we imagine God like we imagine people. But not here. A huge part of the story of Jesus' Baptism is that the heaven were opened, and people heard God speak from his heart. And what did he say? "This is my son whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Imagine if we walked through our daily lives with an open heaven and faith in the possibility of a better, holier, more wholesome world? Might we hear the affirmation of God coming our way more often?

Recently I came upon the story of a Yale Law Professor who, I am sure, delighted God greatly. Unfortunately, he died far too early - in 1986 at the age of only 42, a heart attack. But in that short lifetime, Professor Bob Cover impacted many people and tinkered with the wheels of justice not only as a brilliant theoretical mind, but also in the actions and the interests he pursued, the community organizations he supported. Unsurprisingly, his passion for justice had deep roots in his Jewish faith and in the words of the prophets. Religions does matter or should matter when it comes to justice. Where do we get the motivation to fight for a better, more just world? As a first-year law student at Columbia, young Bob Cover surprised his mentors. One of them, Stephen Wizner, recalls:

“One day, in the Spring semester of 1967, a very earnest, somewhat shy first-year law student appeared in our office and introduced himself as Bob Cover. He wanted to volunteer to assist us in our anti-poverty law reform efforts and asked to be given a research task. He said that he wanted to work on a major theoretical problem that we faced. We were somewhat amused by the intellectual temerity and refreshing naivete of this first-year law student. We told him, somewhat hesitantly, that we were having difficulty developing a legal theory that would enable us to challenge arbitrary actions by local welfare departments in federal courts.”

To make a long story short, this young law student surprised these seasoned professionals with his work and passion and results. Even after he climbed the ladder of academia and became a prominent professor, students could feel that passion and it impacted many of them. I don't know why Bob Cover has such a short life but I am certain that God delighted in this servant. I am also sure God delights in people here in our church community and in many of our efforts. They always say, you can never tell your loved ones enough that you love them. In the same way, we can never remind ourselves enough that God loves us and delights in us. **Amen.**