

Propensity to Bless
Baptism of the Lord/Season of Reconciliation
January 12, 2014
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Isaiah 42.1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-17

It's an awesome thing to stand before the incredible power and magnitude of creation. We were visiting Andrew's family after Christmas in Utah. They live in a valley surrounded by mountains; to my mid-western eyes enormous mountains. They're beautiful but dangerous. Driving up the mountains can mean dodging rocks and boulders that fall. It's the same thing when you stand before the beauty and power of the ocean. We've seen the deadly power that wind over ocean waters can yield. When you stand before power of that magnitude you feel both a sense of awe but also fear. You need to bring a healthy respect (obedience even) for the laws of nature in order to try to keep yourself safe while at the same time being able to enjoy the exhilaration that comes with being surrounded by such power.

The Psalm for today celebrates the way in which God's power exceeds even the magnitude of creation. The song is meant to evoke a sense of awe and wonder in us but also a healthy sense of respect and obedience even before such power. The Psalm claims that God is the all-powerful sovereign and we are to be the obedient servant. Walter Brueggemann begins his commentary on this passage from Isaiah acknowledging that this servant song (as it is often called) begins with that very assumption. The Divine/Human relationship is one of Master and Servant. And faithfulness equals obedience. He has a lot more to say about the passage but that is the beginning assumption¹

You can trace this paradigm through all our texts today. And image for this paradigm grows as key words pop off each page. From the Psalm: God is the one who is *powerful*, flashing forth *flames* of fire, *shaking* the wilderness, sits enthroned as *King*. From the book of Acts: those who *fear* God and do what is *right* are acceptable. From the Gospel: Jesus who comes in the name of this Lord was baptized to fulfill all *righteousness*. He is *Lord* of all. He *commands* us to preach to the people. He is the one

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 42.

ordained by God as *judge* of the living and the dead. Power, obedience, righteousness, judgment. That's one strand that runs throughout these texts. That's one way to conceive of our ongoing relationship with God with obedience at the center of our response. It's one way to look at faith. But I have to confess that it leaves me cold.

When I was thinking about this during the week, all of a sudden I had a flash back to the band director from my high school. He was a powerful presence and a skilled director. We won lots of competitions through those years. Obedience was what he demanded from members of the band. On the one hand we respected him but we also feared him. And to this day I hear about people who have anxiety dreams about being in rehearsal and having to play your part and the fear that overwhelmed you if you weren't prepared.

Obedience in the face of power...it's one to live. I know this paradigm has held the people of God together through the centuries. It still brings life to parts of the church today. But it is a paradigm that is borrowed from human experience when society was structured in rigid hierarchy, where kings literally sat on thrones and ruled their subjects through coercion and fear, demanding obedience and punishing disloyalty. It's one way to structure human life, one way to conceive of our relationship to God. Thankfully it's not the only way. I would be so bold as to say it's not the best way.

What's remarkable to me as we read through the biblical story is that another paradigm emerges even while society continued to be structured in those ways. Sometimes these two paradigms sit side by side within the very same passages like these before us today. Here's another strand to trace through these passages. From Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights" ...God is the one who gives breath and spirit to those of us who walk the earth. From the Psalm: God is the One giving us strength, blessing us with peace. From Acts: God is the one who shows no partiality. Yes God does call forth servants (leaders really) to bring justice but it is not the kind of justice that destroys enemies. Look at how those leaders are to conduct themselves! From Isaiah: They are to protect bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks. They are to bring light, healing, liberation. From Acts: Jesus may be the one ordained by God to judge but look at what that judgment is to bring! At the end of Acts we read "All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in

him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” From the Gospel: As Jesus is fulfilling all righteousness in his baptism what is heard from the thundering voice from heaven? “This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The paradigm emerging from this strand reveals a God whose propensity is to bless, uphold, and delight in us...and then invites us to do the same.

I’m aware that I’m probably preaching to the choir. Hope Church is not exactly a fire and brimstone, power and obedience kind of place. I often laugh when I attend church gatherings and the assumption about leadership is that clergy can singlehandedly decide on the vision for the ministry and lead from the front expecting the membership to just fall in line and follow behind. That’s not the ethos here and I’m glad about that. I wouldn’t want to be your pastor if it were.

Even so, even in a place that values collaboration, that offers mutual respect between leaders and members, that seeks to ground our faithfulness to God in something more life-giving than an obedience born of fear, still we need to hear this word. Our cultural and even some of our religious programming is deep within us. We are formed to trade in fear, competition, judgment, shame. We are taught to worship power: it is what we see all around us every single day. I don’t know about you, but I find for myself, that the old paradigm seeps back into my psyche without my conscious awareness. I notice it when I begin making decisions based on what I think people deserve or what other people will think of me, or because I feel guilty. I notice it when I do things out of a misplaced sense of duty and obligation and I begin to feel resentful and then judgmental toward others who aren’t doing the same. That’s when I recognize that I’ve fallen back into the old paradigm of trying to appease an all-powerful God who keeps tabs on who is doing what’s right and keeps score on who is doing what’s wrong. It’s rule-based, fear driven and motivated by self-protection. It is one way to live...thank God it’s not the only way.

When you begin to immerse yourself in the other paradigm, the second strand I traced through these texts a very different world view opens up. You see God’s power in a very different way. Not a power that seeks to control but a power that seeks to influence, provoke and inspire. You begin to see that the power of God is like the power of the breath to bring life to a body. What God seeks to do is empower us to be fully human and fully ourselves, our best selves, and to be engaged with God in bringing life

and light to the world. As the health ministry reminds us from time to time in the wisdom of the second century St. Irenaeus “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.” I recently read that the quote has a second part that says “and to be alive consists of beholding God.” It’s a powerful way to describe what a faithful life is like: someone who is fully alive and able to behold God.

We enter the season of reconciliation today. In this season we’re invited to be awake to the places in us and around us that are broken and in need of restoration. I can’t help but think of the profound difference that it makes to approach the whole idea of reconciliation from the perspective of perspective of blessing and delight rather than obedience and fear. What does it mean to behold God in the face of one who has hurt you? How does it change how you interact with someone who is making you crazy to know that God delights in them? How do you look at the politics of our country, of our city, of your office or family when you remember that we are given as a light for the sake of healing and liberation?

Jesus is the one, in Matthew’s account of his baptism, who hears the voice from heaven. If Jesus needed to hear these words of blessing from God at the outset of his ministry, you had better believe that you and I need to hear them over and over again.

So do whatever you need to do to remember God’s propensity to ward blessing. Touch the waters of baptism every time you come through this place. Do what Von did when I first created the baptism banner; running back and forth with his fingers through the ribbons. Read the opening words of Isaiah or the closing words of Matthew over and again. Imagine the specific ways God might speak a word of blessing over you. Whatever you do, let it seep deep into your psyche and soul until it becomes the lens through which you see.

On Friday I finally returned to my morning practice of prayer after a couple of weeks of vacation and unstructured schedule. As I turned to my prayer book for Friday morning (which I’ve shared from before, *Celtic Benediction*), I realized this prayer is one of the ways I keep God’s propensity to bless in front of me. I invite you to join me now as we share in this prayer for blessing:

In the morning light, O God,
may I glimpse again your image deep within me
the threads of eternal glory
woven into the fabric of every man and woman.
Again may I catch sight of the mystery of the human soul
fashioned in your likeness
deeper than knowing
more enduring than time.
And in glimpsing these threads of light
Amidst the weakness and distortions of my life
let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty deep in my soul.
Let me be recalled
to the strength and beauty of your image in every living soul.²

² J. Phillip Newell, *Celtic Benediction: Morning and Night Prayer*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 62.