

THE SONG OF THE SERVANT

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on January 9, 2011
Crossroads United Church, Kingston ON

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

Mark Nepo is an American writer and a cancer survivor. During the long months of his treatment that included both radiation and chemotherapy, he had occasion to wonder about the ultimate value of such invasive treatment, all be it treatment for a similarly most invasive disease. After a long and difficult period he asked his doctors to stop. He could feel his body cry out for time, time to rest from the treatments, and time to heal. Going to the hospital for treatments and tests week after week, and month after month, he said, was like planting a seed in good soil, and every day pulling it up to check the roots. It cannot take hold; it withers from over examination. Now, years after the fact and cancer free, he has embraced a tradition of allowing life to lie in fallow. To let things be and listen for what grows where we cannot see, but can hear when left alone in the silence. He wrote a poem titled *What Ties Me to the Earth* as a testament to the experience and the knowledge gleaned.

My heart was beating like a heron awakened
In the weeds, no room to move. Tangled,
And surprised by the noise of my mind,
I fluttered without grace to the center
Of the lake which humans call silence.

I guess, if you should ask, peace
Is no more than the underside
Of tired wings resting on the lake
While the heart in its feathers
Pounds softer and softer.

I suppose that all of us have experienced the restless internal yearning that cries out for attention. For some, it might mean taking an intentional break from heretofore routine, as Nepo did in ceasing his treatment. For others, it results in some kind of a spiritual odyssey that may bring one to the threshold of a sanctuary, or to new age thinking. Others may find themselves on the analyst's couch, as the quest is unraveled in professional relationship. Your quest may have its roots in a question that took you into the academy, or it may manifest itself from time to time when those unanswerable questions rear their heads. Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life? Do I really believe in God, and if I believe in God, what exactly do I believe? Am I living up to my potential? Is there something more that I should be doing, or experiencing as I walk through this gift and maze called life? Where are my gifts and goals best suited?

I take for granted that all of us have had the experience of feeling our hearts beat within our breasts like a heron caught in the weeds. I trust also that most of us have experienced some kind of epiphany of realization when we stand at the end/beginning of a journey, for every journey's end is a new journey begun. The Magi who traveled following the star of invitation and proclamation still had to return home after they had offered their gifts. As for Jesus, his immersion into the baptismal waters of the Jordan River signaled an end to his vocation as a carpenter and the beginning of his ministry as an itinerant preacher. Perhaps it is the end/beginning inherent within the very sacrament of baptism that is so compelling. Baptism does not keep life from happening to us in all of its agony and ecstasy. It proffers no insurance or protection to our children and grandchildren from illness, accident, or disappointment. It offers no guarantees of ease; just look to the example of Jesus for proof. But baptism into the death and new life of Jesus Christ may just give us an anchor for when the wind and waves buffet. Jesus Christ in his divinity was immersed into the waters of the human condition so that in our human condition we might glimpse divinity. The one who will save his people from sins by submitting to death on a cross consecrates himself to his vocation by joining with those who had presented themselves for baptism.

The king of kings and Lord of Lords stands in solidarity with those who are his people-even if it was only John the Baptizer who recognized in whose company he stood. And John is keenly aware of the difference between them. As the herald of the messiah he did not see it as his responsibility to baptize the Christ, but Jesus was never one to subscribe to the social mores that separated people out according to position and status. It was not simply the baptism of John that he was embracing but God's will for him as king of kings and lord of lords. The one who will save his people by dying a cruel death some scant years hence, will consecrate himself to his vocation by joining with them in the waters of the Jordan. And as John's mission and ministry are ending, that of the Christ is burgeoning. As the star of the herald fades, that of the Christ grows brighter. As he came up from the water the heavens opened to him and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending from heaven and alighting upon the servant. And he heard the affirming voice of God say, "This is my son the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The pen of Matthew re-echoes that of Isaiah 42 who scripted, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom I delight."

Sometimes it may seem as though the scriptures selected for a particular Sunday have very little in common with one another. That is not the case for this morning. The prophecy of Isaiah is one of the Servant Songs, which, Christian scholars have long viewed as associated with Jesus. The first verse hints at Trinitarian theology with reference to Creator, Redeemer and Spirit. Throughout the passage we read that the delight of God will demonstrate restraint with his voice, and respect for creation. He will be committed to justice and will not grow weary in its unyielding pursuit. He will be invested by God as the purveyor of covenant, and light to the nations. He will open the eyes of the blind, and free the prisoner. The beloved will usher in the dawn of the new things that God is bringing to birth. John roots the new beginning in the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. That is why we acknowledge it annually. In the fledgling days of a New Year, while the snow is on the ground and days are short and nights are long, we set our face towards Jerusalem.

There are some stories in scripture that many of us hold as dear. The faith of the shepherds and the diligence of the Magi associated with his birth never seem to bore us with their familiarity. The baptism of Jesus by John may not hold the same romantic fascination for us. And yet it stands as an end/beginning. It recaptures the end of the old way and the dawn of the new, and as we gather together after the holiday travels that may have separated us for a time, it is a good place for us to begin. It inspires us to see Jesus in the fullness of his humanity and divinity. We glimpse him in his obedience to the will of God. We see him stand in solidarity with those who will become his subjects. We view him as fulfillment of prophecy and the agent of hope. His will be a baptism of fire as well as water. He will know love and hatred, loyalty and fickleness, acceptance and rejection.

We will watch as the crowd thickens around him as they look to him as saviour from illness, hunger and poverty. We will hear him cry out for support in his hour of need and be abandoned by those with whom he had the closest ties. The dance of joy at his birth and baptism will become a sad dance of misunderstanding, and the songs that filled the air with angelic praise will become dirges. His life will mirror our own and this year, begun in celebration as we anticipate our first anniversary, will unfold with its triumphs and its tragedies as all years inevitably hold. But standing as we are at the juxtaposition of what was and what yet shall be, we join with him and share in his baptism. We acknowledge his conviction, his unyielding obedience to God and his affirmation of John's ministry.

We acknowledge today that which was conceived in the primordial waters of creation; foretold in the servant songs of the prophets; brought to fruition in Bethlehem and launched in the new beginning following his baptism by John at the Jordan. The baptism of Jesus is a significant part in the unfolding story of God's plan of salvation. More than a blip on the radar of his life it is an act, which, is hinged to the past and opens the door to the future. Standing in solidarity with those that he has come to serve and save launches his ministry. This is our faith. This is our hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.