

Sermon for January 13, 2008

Readings: Isaiah 42:1-4; Matthew 3:13-17

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Recognizing Jesus

One December, when we lived in Northern California among people who thought weather like last Sunday was cold winter weather, I was writing an Advent sermon on the text from Isaiah 11:6, *The wolf shall live with the lamb*, when one of the lambs in our world came to the church office and told our secretary he needed help.

I went out to talk with him. At first, I thought he said he needed help getting to Lake Tahoe; then it was Pyramid Lake in Nevada; and then just to Reno. Finally, he only needed to make a phone call there.

But when I walked near him to show him where the phone was, he stepped away from me and kind of shrunk into himself; and after that he couldn't look at me. He mumbled a little bit more and then stood silently with his head down for a few seconds. Then he shuffled slowly out of the office and down the church drive, on his way to who-knows-where.

That young man was a lamb who was in a lot of danger. The wolves were circling. He was not going to make it much longer. The wolf and the lamb might live together in the future, but it wasn't going to happen soon enough for him.

I think people like that young man are more common than we realize – people who just don't fit into the world as it is right now.

They may be in special classes at school, or stocking shelves in the back room, or cleaning tables after we have left the restaurant, or picking produce in our fields, or walking the streets unnoticed. They may be doing a normal job with an abnormal debilitating condition or depression. Or they may simply be sitting, invisible, at home because no other options are available to them.

For whatever reason – and there are so many reasons – these vulnerable people exist on the margins of our world: often because of some combination of something about them – some way they are different from the rest of us – **and** something about society's or people's attitudes toward them.

Isaiah was speaking about these people when he said of God's servant: *A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.*

Isaiah tells the Hebrew people, who are in captivity in Babylon, that God will send her servant to bring them justice and save them: *Here is my servant, ... my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

You know what the people wanted: a warrior King, in David's line, to lead them to military victory over Gentiles and foreigners. But there is something here that is different: God's Servant ... will not cry or lift up his voice, ... a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.

Isaiah is telling the people that God will send her servant to save them; but that in doing so, God will look out for all people: including the vulnerable, the **outcast**, the **marginalized**. No one – neither the bruised reed nor the dimly burning wick – will be hurt or left behind.

American Capitalism has done a pretty good job of raising the general, overall standard of living of people in the United States; but there have always been way too many people who fall, uncared-for, and are left behind. And recently, **more** and **more** Americans are unable to

keep up. It is not a political endorsement to say that John Edwards is increasingly correct – there **are** two Americas. And the bottom one, the poor one, is growing.

This is to say nothing, of course, of the people in the 3rd world who have been impoverished by American economic and foreign policies toward their countries.

In the bringing of justice for all, it is these people for whom God's Servant will particularly and especially care. They will be the special recipients of God's empowering and enlightening grace.

A seminary professor friend of mine had a former student come back to see him, after a few years of being out of school. They had coffee and chatted, and then she said, *I have news to tell you. I'm pregnant.* The professor was happy for her. He knew they had been trying since their other child, a daughter, had been born while the woman was in seminary.

Then she said: *We just got some test results, and we know two things about our child. He will be a boy, and he will have Down's Syndrome. I don't know how we will handle it. We are trusting God to help us.*

Over a year later, my friend received a post-Christmas letter from the family; and in it, the woman wrote: *After 9 long months of my discomfort, Timothy Andrew took his first breath and let out a hearty yell. He was whisked off to the neo-natal intensive care unit, where he spent the next 3 days before coming home.*

He is strong, alert, and beautiful; and he has the sweetest disposition. He daily shatters our images of handicapped and special needs. He may need special help, but already he is no slouch in giving special love. We are blessed.

Kate (their 8-year-old daughter) is Tim's champion. Hearing our concerns about how well Tim might be accepted by other kids, Kate informed the kids on our block: "My brother has Down's Syndrome and everyone's going to play with him, or else!"

One evening we overheard her talking to Tim: "I'm so glad you're here, Timothy. I'll always love you. I'll always be nearby."

The mother finished her letter with this: *Christ came to identify with us, especially with those most in need. While some of you saw us that way, I want you to understand that we also know miraculous blessings. We have experienced them first-hand.*

This story is a pale human analogy for the empowering care and compassion shown by God's Servant for the bruised reed and the dimly burning wick. In a way, it is a model for the way **we** are to care for the outcast, the marginalized, the vulnerable.

But there is something more in this story, isn't there – something about reciprocal and shared love, something about the identity of the one who comes; and that takes us to our other text, about Jesus' Baptism. When Jesus comes to be Baptized, John says to him: *I need to be Baptized by you, and do you come to me?*

Yes, Jesus comes to John. The one Isaiah, without knowing it, called, *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*. The Creator and Redeemer of the universe, the Savior, Lord and Friend of humankind, completely identified himself with us, with all of us, in his Baptism by John.

He did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. He humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

If he was born in human likeness, he was not only born into the house and lineage of David, he was **also** born in the form of a bruised reed, in the likeness of a dimly burning wick.

God's Servant came not only to teach us how to care for the lowly and the outcast, Jesus came as the outcast, the lowly and the vulnerable one.

This story-poem is by J. Barrie Shepherd. It tells about going to the Green Market, the Farmer's Market at Union Square in New York City, on Holy Saturday, the day before Easter:

*We were returning from the Green market
when I glimpsed ahead a shambling, awkward figure
lurching his twisted way along the sidewalk
and jerking fiercely now and then as if in seizure.
He wore a red baseball cap slightly off center,
sweatshirt, jeans, sneakers – all shabby
but well-cared-for – and over his right arm
a cardboard carton with the lid cut off to shape
a sort of basket, I suppose, to display wares.
I glanced in as we passed, and sure enough
there were ballpoint pens, other plastic items
in there waiting to be purchased.
I wondered at the courage of one
so violently deformed, yet coping, contriving
to survive in this predatory city.*

*Those contorted legs could not move him
that fast, and we were swiftly past him to confront,
lying across a heap of trash bags up against the wall,
a homeless man, asleep, with the usual pathetic sign
informing all and sundry:*

I'm in trouble, please help. Someday

I may be able to do the same for you.

*I walked on by, ignored both plea and promise,
passed right by as I've been taught to
by this casual, careless, care-less cruel city;
then glancing back over my shoulder saw our friend
in the red baseball cap struggle across,
laboriously read that grubby and ill-lettered sign, then lean
over and drop something in the cup.*

*Yes, I realize, it only encourages. I know
they'll likely spend it all on booze.
I've heard and lived these arguments,
knowing far too much, believing far too little,
and being so afraid, for years now.
But there was something in that simple act;
an eastered innocence put me to shame, drove me to my knees
among the sidewalk lily vendors at the Green Market.
I think I saw the risen Christ,
a day early, but there just the same,
on Broadway, Saturday, alongside Union Square.*

Jesus came as the bruised reed, the dimly burning wick. Jesus came as the vulnerable and the outcast one.

We finally come to the point of it. All the pain and indignity that unfeeling nature and heartless humankind have heaped on the suffering and vulnerable ones of this world has been born by Jesus Christ on the cross. He is always with us – even in those most horrible moments – transforming us and our world into his image and likeness.

He began that journey, that complete identification with each of us, that ministry of healing and reconciliation, in Baptism by John in the Jordan River. He began that day, a bruised reed, a dimly burning wick, showing us how to live, how to care for each other, how to share God's compassion with all humankind.

A couple of months ago, our Executive Council discussed Guidelines to keep in mind as we consider possible new mission projects to undertake, new ways to share our compassion. Those guidelines, and the whole discussion, indicate a desire to be in relationship with those with and for whom we are in mission.

There was the very explicit desire not to have our relationships be paternalistic, but rather mutually enriching, mutually enhancing. It was an acknowledgement, in the language of today's sermon, that we are all, in one way or another, bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks; and that we need each other for fully faithful lives.

Undoubtedly, because we are weak and finite people, we will not carry out those hopes as well as we should or could. But in our faith, we will try. And in some ways, in the grace of Jesus Christ through this church, we will surely succeed. Amen.