

Sermon
Kirk of St. James
January 11, 2026
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

The first week back into routine after a couple weeks out of it can be tough. Family and friends have returned home leaving our houses quieter. Trees have come down, gifts put away. In our household we were reminded of what vegetables look like again. Both of our children were ready for the weekend and it was only Tuesday. Just under two weeks into the New Year and I don't know about you but I am not any more organized than I was on December 31st! Then today we come to church to mark the baptism of Jesus, the first Sunday after epiphany.

You might wonder why we had an extra scripture reading today and it was because I wasn't sure what direction to go in this morning. All were suggested readings, but then as the week wore on global news came rolling in. Marching and protesting in Iran, a woman killed in Minneapolis, uncertainty in the global south. How should we as Christians live and respond in a world plagued by so many questions, issues, and injustices?

The baptism of Jesus would actually be a great place to start. We could talk about how Jesus truly came alongside humanity, when he was lowered beneath the waters of the Jordan by his cousin John, which also marked the beginning of his ministry in the world. I read a story told by another minister about a young man named Kyle. In grade nine young people at their church typically do confirmation classes, and Kyle attended, contributed, made friends, and then on the day he was confirmed he was also baptized. Then for weeks after they never saw Kyle again. When the minister called to check in the mother was surprised and said, "Oh, well, I guess I thought Kyle was all done...isn't he done?" Matthew tells us no—this is only the beginning of your Christian life.

In Acts we have another important scripture passage, here we are reminded that God welcomes all people—that the spirit of God rests upon all people. A radical

affirmation at a time when lines were being drawn and division was threatening unity. Peter reminds the early Christian believers that, “God’s justice may never be bought. Nothing will persuade God to look the other way or reward evil and punish the good. God’s justice is always reliably different from human justice, which is subject to corruption.” Again an important message when we look at the world around us.

However, I believe we need to go back even further this morning, to the first of the Servant Songs in Isaiah. The reading this morning was addressed to a community that was fractured and broken. There is one group of Israelites who had been carried into captivity by Babylon, and are now living in exile. Then there was another group who were trying to scratch out a living in the homeland of Judah. Now those living in exile actually did not have it as bad as those left behind. They had a certain amount of freedom, and were managing. For those in Judah life was hard, other armies, raiders, and vandals had plundered what was left of the land, leaving them precious little to get by on. One thing both groups shared was their deep loss, their sense of dislocation, the reality of being a conquered people, and the questions that were left about God in the ashes of the lives they once knew.

Whenever we are faced with difficulty and hardship questions naturally arise. For those in exile, and those left behind trying to scrape together some sort of existence questions were being voiced. “Probing questions—difficult to ask—were gaining currency: how does our God stack up against these others who claim allegiance? What is the character of our God? Does God have the power to protect us or even care for us? If so, how do we know that our God is with us?” We have been destroyed as a nation, does that mean that the Babylonian gods like Marduk and Nebo are more powerful?

All valid, and honest questions. Isaiah helped people see where God was in their lives, and the eternal hope that is offered through God. The unity that Peter preached, the ministry that Jesus led, is all possible through the leadership described in the Servant Song. “Jesus took the shape of his ministry from the images, symbols, hopes, and visions of scripture.” Stephanie Paulsell, a professor at Harvard Divinity School

describes it as follows, “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 into fullness, for small efforts struggling to plant their roots. “A bruised reed he will not break,” Isaiah says, “and a dimly burning wick he will not quench. 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.”

How many contemporary models of leadership do we see in our world that look like that? How many? I wrote my undergrad thesis on Martin Luther King Jr. and during my research I was always struck by his commitment to non-violence. It is a difficult road to follow. One night his home was bombed while his wife and child were inside—it was retaliation for the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Over three hundred people gathered around his house willing to go out and repay the violence. That moment became a defining one for King because he put his belief in non-violence to action, calmly dispersing the crowd. He later said, “Living through the actual experience of the protest, nonviolence became more than a method to which I gave intellectual assent; it became a commitment to a way of life. Many of the things that I had not cleared up intellectually concerning nonviolence were now solved in the sphere of practical action.”

We live in a world where anger is easy. Chad follows a movie reviewer called Chris Stuckman, and a number of years ago he began to withdraw certain types of movie reviews. He noticed that in the world and the on-line world those who whipped up anger and negativity were getting all the follows and views, and he didn’t want to be part of that anymore, so he withdrew. Clickbait, key board warriors, the anonymity the internet lends to us, are such an ingrained part of the world. Isaiah would say that Servant Leadership is a form of leadership that is tougher than most. I have never understood people who see non-violence, love, or trying to be peacemakers as weak. If

it was easy everyone would be doing it. In Isaiah the servant chooses patient, never ceasing, work for justice, work that takes root, work that steadily fans good ideas into flames.” The work of the Servant Leader reveals to us part of who God is, and also who we are called to be. I do not know about you, but leader who shelters that which is not yet strong, a leader who sustains what is weak, a leader who genuinely pursues justice, especially for those unable to attain it would be a leader I would love to follow.

I think that is why so many of us took notice of Bishop Budde when she implored world leaders to be merciful last January. We heard someone speak who echoes the Servant Leader, and it was different, and true, and also rattled us. On this Sunday when we mark the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his earthly ministry we know he did so with a love, mercy and justice. He showed us how we too can live in the world the same way, guided by his teaching and example.

These are strange and uncertain days in a way that is very different from what we experienced during covid. Sometimes it feels impossible to know what to do or, how to respond. Siblings in Christ, as we live in the world, as we make our decisions, as we use our voices, may we echo the example of the servant leader. May we offer love, encouragement, strength, hope and justice. May we fan the flames of what is good, protect what is weak, and help nurture things—good things, that are trying to take root. Do not let the world cause you to believe that God is anything less than present in our lives.