

***Slow and Steady - Sermon Based on Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17***  
by David Hindman on Sunday, January 9, 2011

When I was a child I loved Aesop's fable, "The Tortoise and the Hare." In the story a rabbit makes fun of a very slow tortoise who challenges the rabbit to a race. When the race begins the rabbit takes off, gets way ahead and decides to rest awhile and take a nap. The tortoise doesn't give up. He keeps plodding along and eventually moves past the snoozing bunny. When the rabbit awakes, he races to catch up but it is too late and the tortoise wins. The moral? "Slow and steady wins the race." Or in the wise words of the Bible, "the race is not given to the swift" (Ecclesiastes 9:11)

There is wisdom here for the race of faith and discipleship. Sometimes we think that becoming a Christian is rather easy-say the sinner's prayer; get baptized; attend a new member class or go through Confirmation and voila, we're a Christ follower. Check that off our to-do list and then get on with life without another thought.

That's not been my experience at all. If I want a vital and life-giving relationship with Christ that makes a difference in my life, I have to focus on it every day and make it the central aspect of my life. Following Jesus is not a one shot, impressive flash in pan. It's a life long, long haul experience. Slow and steady wins the race of faith, too.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. In today's Gospel lesson Matthew tells about Jesus coming to John the Baptist to be baptized. At first John declines to do so. He says Jesus should be baptizing him and not the other way around. But Jesus sets the example of an obedient child doing what his father wants. He says both he and John are to do the right thing, even if God's will doesn't always make sense to us. And so John baptizes Jesus.

When Jesus comes up out of the water, something revealing happens. The heavens open up - a window is opened by God into the human realm. The Holy Spirit hovers over Jesus and the water as gentle as a dove, like it did on the first day of creation in Genesis. God speaks again, like he did on that first day. But this time God says, "This is my beloved; my chosen, in whom my soul delights, with whom I am well pleased."

When we remember the Baptism of the Lord, we are invited to remember our own baptism. When we are baptized, a new creation happens for us, too. The Holy Spirit comes into us, too, with life-giving power. And God says to us, "You are my beloved, I am pleased with you." The Baptism of the Lord is an opportunity to celebrate this incredible good news: God will do in our lives what God has done in Jesus. That's the gospel truth.

If you were listening carefully just now, you may have noticed something. God's message at Jesus' baptism is drawn from the prophecy of Isaiah we heard this morning. Isaiah 42 is the first so-called Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah. Four of these songs are in Isaiah. Each one describes someone who's been given a job by God - to bring justice and light to the world. The beloved servant is chosen and called and Holy Spirit-equipped to do the work. But this is odd - the servant doesn't use overwhelming force to make God's will a reality. Shock and awe are not in his vocabulary. The servant is humble and gentle, but won't give up or give out. The servant will endure to the end, until justice is done on earth, light comes to the blind, and freedom arrives for every captive.

Who is this suffering servant of God? Listen to the story of Jesus' baptism. Look at his ministry through the lens of the suffering servant songs. Christians see Jesus as the Suffering Servant. But Isaiah's songs are intriguingly ambiguous. Sometimes they seem to refer to a person. Sometimes they seem to describe a group of people called to do God's work of goodness and light.

That brings us back to our celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. In today's opening prayer, we said we are baptized into Christ's baptism. Christ followers are Christ's partners in ministry as we continue his work and live his Way. Baptism does not advance us or get us on God's good side, or inoculate us from Hell. Baptism calls and commissions and equips us by God's Holy Spirit to do God's business, not ours. Baptism puts us at God's disposal and at God's service, not the other way around. We join our lives to Christ's life to do Christ's work with the Holy Spirit's help. And like Isaiah's suffering servant, we are in it for the long haul. It will take the best of our life as we center ourselves in God and ask, "How may I help you, Lord?"

Slow and steady wins the race of faith. When the church staff and I meet each week, we spend the first part of our time praying for five members or families of our faith family – we are in the Gs now. And we discuss a covenant we created this summer. We are watching over one another in love. We aim to hold each other accountable to do Christ's work in a way that honors Christ. Sometimes we do well and sometimes we fall flat on our face. But I tell you this: God's Spirit is changing us and helping us to be better than we would be on our own. Pray for us to continue on that road toward healthy servant leadership.

Six months ago, I gave us all a recipe for healing. The first ingredient? Remember our baptism. Remember our lives don't belong to us but to our Lord, and put ourselves at his service. That's still the first ingredient. I've visited in some of your homes and been encouraged to see the recipe on fridges or near a kitchen sink. How are we doing on the hard suffering servant work of healing and becoming like Christ? Are we reading scripture and praying? Is Sunday worship and daily time with God a priority? Are we encouraging and building each other up and becoming generous souls? Are we confronting and confessing and forgiving each other? This isn't a

summertime gimmick created by your crazy pastor – it is life and health and peace for us. We've come a good way. Keep moving toward the upward call of Christ. And if you forgot about this and took a spiritual nap along the way – wake up! Start moving again. Don't let Christ out of your sight! I'll ask again in six months. Growing up into Christ is not a sprint or even a marathon. It's a way of life.

In his book *Born to Run*, Christopher McDougall introduces readers to Mexico's Tarahumara Indians. They run hundreds of miles at a time, barefoot and without rest. Their extraordinary skill proves that everything we think we know about running is wrong - including our high tech running shoes and the way we run.

There is a spiritual lesson here. Maybe we're running life's race completely wrong. Maybe our high tech, rat race busy, sophisticated modern ways don't give life but suck it out of us. Maybe there's a better way. And here it is - put ourselves at God's service. Learn from our LifeCoach who's already run the race of faith. Stretch our spiritual muscles: do justice; spread light. Share the freeing news: open eyes too blind to see that there is a better way. Christ is up ahead calling us to keep going toward a servant life. Christ is the example. He invites to run after him in such a way that God will say of us, "You are my child, my beloved; I am pleased with you." With the wind of the Holy Spirit at our back and moving us forward, let us remember our baptism, and be grateful. Amen.