

01.11.26 ~ 1st Sunday after the Epiphany

“Foundations of Decision”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Words of Prophecy

Isaiah 42:1-9 NIV

Pew Bible 622

¹“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.

² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.

³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.

In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

⁵ This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:

⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸ “I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not yield my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

Leader: These Are the Words of Certain Prophecy.

People: Thanks be to God!

Words of Assurance

Matthew 3:13-17 NIV

Pew Bible 837

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Leader: These Are Words of Jesus’ Baptism.

People: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Sovereign Lord, we worship you with all our hearts and minds. We are still anticipating what this year brings, but in you, we know it is good. As we hear again the Scriptures of prophecy and Jesus’ baptism, let us apply it to the foundation of our faith, our spiritual roots, that is. Help us to understand Jesus’ calling as servant and apply that to our own baptism and first calling to salvation. Let us begin the new year with reflection, prayer, and vision casting for ourselves and our church. Help us to experience the incarnation of Jesus in all we do. I ask you to speak through this message and messenger as we bring our theme into understanding! In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Happy Epiphany! Well, yes, the decorations are down but we must be joyful as we enter this new year. Are you a leave them up until Valentine’s Day kind of person who loves Christmas decorations, or are you a take-them-down-right-away kind of person? It does not matter, but I do think there are different types of people—creative or literal. It is easier at Easter, because although we also do 40 days of Lent, the holiday lasts an entire week not just one day! And the decorations are reverent, calmer, and less athletic to install or remove, right? Thank you to Bill for donating several hours to help Pedro and me un-deck the halls! I also want to thank Carol for her Vision newsletter distribution help each month, and the Sandwich Team, specifically Elmer, who delivered both boxes of sandwiches last week, which allowed me to do extra required work. David and Roudaina are both back and I look forward to hearing about their warm vacations.

We have spent some time in Isaiah over the holidays, and this too is a familiar passage. Some scholars say that “my servant” refers to Israel and, yes, Israel was God’s chosen people and his delight. Some assumed the prophecy was about the political situation with Cyrus and exiles returning from Babylon, and the double meaning was helpful. But verses 1-4 seem to be clearly a reference to the foretold Messiah, who will show mercy and bring justice to the nations. He will be faithful and not discouraged and will provide hope for God’s people. The Lord promised to assist the servant in his mission. The servant would not thrust himself into service but be called into it. God assured him of this calling to righteously obey his will by leading him to help facilitate God’s will, being in true covenant with God and his people. He would be a light to the Gentiles who were in darkness. Not of his own will but of God’s. Who does this sound like in hindsight? Jesus, of course. The prophet closes reminding the readers (even today) that God will personally prepare his new hearers, whether Greeks or Hebrews or even us, to be open to God’s will and to act in obedience. But because of the gift of free will, the hearers, the servant as Messiah, and we ourselves are still able to decide whether we surrender to those callings to follow God’s will.

Last week, for post-Christmas context, Matthew told us about the magi, the wise men, and Herod’s plot to kill the male children to prevent a different king from stealing his leadership. Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt until Herod died. They moved back but because Herod’s son and successor, Archelaus, who was equally treacherous, they went to Nazareth instead of Bethlehem. The Galilee region was ruled by a different son of Herod’s, Antipas, who was a capable more merciful ruler.

Nazareth was not a respected city because it housed a Roman garrison (we would call it a military base). The Nazarenes were thought to be friends with the Romans and agreeable because they did have to live together in the town.

In Isaiah 11:1 the prophet said the Messiah would be from Jesse's "roots" like a branch from that family and heritage. Did you know that the word branch in Hebrew is "נָצֶר (netser)", meaning shoot/sprout," with consonants, and is the root of the word/name Nazareth? The coming one would be humble and have an insignificant beginning, like a bruised reed or a shoot that could easily die off.

After their return to Nazareth, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph live relatively quiet lives as a family, having other brothers and sisters, learning carpentry, and going to synagogue. Jesus and his cousin John grow up. The Gospel writer Matthew then goes on to describe John the Baptist as he fulfills his calling as forerunner to Jesus. John's lifestyle, actions, teachings, and pronouncement of another more powerful than he was coming was revolutionary. He described one who would baptize not with water but with the judgment fire of God's Holy Spirit. Our passage today is also found in Mark 1:9-11 and Luke 3:21-22 with less description.

John's baptisms of his disciples were all about repentance from sin, but from what sin did Jesus need to repent? John felt he should be baptized by Jesus, the one the prophets foretold, even though the Law had no such requirements. The point of Jesus' own baptism wasn't repentance but to connect him to sinners. Jesus' decision to put himself in the same categories as humans who sin is significant. Jesus was fulfilling his need

to humble himself before others. And as he decided to surrender to God's calling in this way, God affirmed his calling and divine decision. This is where his humanity and divinity converged. The spirit of God descended on him in the form of a dove and God's voice proclaimed: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased (Matthew 3:17)." This affirmation assured several principles: Jesus was God's choice; Jesus was approved by God; Jesus accepted his role and calling; John understood that his own calling was to announce and then step aside; and through Jesus, humanity (God's chosen created children) would receive salvation! There were other implications from these words about Jesus' future that were not clear to the Jewish people, but we will discover more of those closer to Easter. These important words from God became an assurance that Jesus was the Messiah the prophets had announced. Through these words, God reveals his own identity and that of his Son.

Those identities are two persons of the triune God and are the foundations of our faith, or the roots of the tree of faith, if you will. The new year is a good time to reflect on God's will for us and his earlier callings in our lives. Why were we called into faith? What else does God want me to do or to share with others? My wisdom? Abilities? Teachings? Experience? My baptism story? My faith? Please continue to ponder God's divine intervention in your own life, past and present. Then ask yourself, ok, how will I live it out this year? How does God's influence affect my spiritual disciplines, prayer life, goals, vision, decisions, or personal interactions? You are beloved by God, too. May Christ utilize your strong and rooted faith to build branches of hope and salvation with others who need Jesus. Amen! ||

Pray with me now: Steadfast God, we thank you for your son, Jesus. Help us to digest these words and remember them so that we strengthen our relationship with you, Jesus, and each other. Help us to share where we see Christ influencing our daily lives. Make us spiritually prosperous this season as we ask you to fill this sanctuary with those seeking your presence and to open opportunities for invitation. May our foundations of decision be firm and rooted in you. Bless us as we go on our way in the holy name of Jesus, Amen.