

Sermon for Baptism of Our Lord Year A 2020  
*For You*

It seems that Peter preached some pretty memorable sermons— at least two are recorded in the book of Acts— one of which we heard just a few moments ago.

No doubt, Cornelius and his family remembered that sermon since they were all baptized immediately following hearing Peter's message.

There are only perhaps a dozen sermons of the many that I have listened to through my 64 years that I remember.

Today's texts have me thinking about two of them—

Well, actually, one is more a memory of an experience I had while listening to a sermon about 50 years ago when I was around 14 or 15.

The other is a memory of a sermon I heard about 18 years ago when I was in seminary.

I'm going to begin by telling you first about the memory of that sermon from my seminary days.

It was my first year at Princeton Seminary.

Every day at noon there was a worship service.

Faculty members and graduate students were the preachers --and they were always very fine.

The sermon I heard this day was delivered by a graduate student—a Lutheran doctoral student of homiletics (which is the academic word for preaching).

I don't recall it word for word, of course.

Rather, it was and is the tender words of Isaiah spoken then which I mostly remember now:

*A bruised reed he will not break;*

*and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.*

It seemed that the words of her sermon were being spoken directly not only to me but to all of the students gathered there. She spoke with hard earned empathy and with the certain promise that the challenges of seminary education and doing ministry which often seemed to threaten to break, diminish, or extinguish us, would not.

As a second-career seminarian attending class with fellow students half my age,  
I needed those words of encouragement that day.  
I knew, also, that I would need those words of encouragement—indeed, everyone needs those words of encouragement and assurance—every day—on some days more than others.  
As she spoke, she was living the truth of the promise for those gathered there—  
she was bolstering up the bruised  
and protecting the dimly burning wicks among us.  
It struck me that in many ways  
that is an important part of my calling to be a pastor—  
but it is also the calling of the church—of all the baptized—  
to protect the weak until they are strong enough to stand,  
and to cup gentle hands around a weak flame  
until it can burn on its own.

Yet that runs so contrary to the way of the world though,  
doesn't it?

No matter where we find ourselves,  
it is far too common to just run over the competition  
or snuff out someone else's hopes and dreams  
in order to finish first.

And yet . . . the promise in Isaiah is that the “servant”  
--who I hear as being Jesus—  
*does not* and *will not* break that which is already bent  
or extinguish that which is struggling to stay lit.

There are a whole lot more promises which ring out in the  
prophet’s voice today to which I cling.  
Hopeful words about justice being established  
and breath and spirit sustained;  
light and sight and freedom for those who need it most of all.  
It seems to me, though, it all begins here in this promise:  
that which is most fragile will not be destroyed,  
abandoned, snuffed out.

Indeed, in part, this speaks the truth to me that God is not done  
with us—not even when we waver, or stumble, or fall.

Not even when others or we ourselves do not recognize our  
value or worth.

Not when we are at our most weak and most fragile.

God’s love and grace does not grow faint . . .

God in Christ is still bringing forth justice in the earth.

Not with violence,

but with the liberating power of love and mercy.

Now it goes without saying,  
that there are bruised reeds  
and dimly burning wicks all around us.

Even if we don’t see them or recognize them at first.

And even when things are going well,  
there are always parts of ourselves or our lives  
that are bruised or bent or barely flickering.

Yet God does not grow faint,  
though we do grow weary and uncertain,  
sometimes questioning things we have always felt sure of.

Recently, quite unexpectedly,  
I received a note that had the same effect on me  
as that sermon in seminary—  
Without even knowing they were doing so,  
they cupped their hands around my “dimly burning wick”—  
helping it enough that it might shine once more.  
It was a small thing,  
but it was a gesture of kindness which spoke to me  
of who we are all meant to be for one another.  
Every day.

All the time.  
This is who Jesus was and is  
as he came to us, as one of us—as the Servant to the servants.

We get a first glimpse of this today as we hear how  
Jesus humbly submitted to John’s baptism in the river Jordan.  
Indeed, as Jesus came to us as a human being,  
he taught us what it is to be fully human.  
And this being so, what we hear today  
is that to be “fully human” is, in part,  
to recognize our fragility—  
our own and the fragility of one another.  
We are called to be and do as Jesus did:  
To be the ones who don’t break those who are bruised.  
To never ever be the ones who extinguish  
the flickering flame of faith, hope, and love of another.

We are called to help everyone to know and hear the message that they, too, are God's beloved child.

So now that brings me to the other memory of the experience I had long ago hearing a sermon when I was 14 or 15.

I can't tell you what the sermon was exactly about, but the message I heard and received was "this is *for you*, Susan"—

Luther says the words "for you" require a believing heart.

I have come to understand that experience as Spirit testifying to me through the words of Pastor Whitney's sermon,

fanning the flames of my faith at a time in my life when my faith helped me to meet difficult times at home and even at school.

(And, yes, it was the first time I began to sense a call to ordained ministry.)

It may often seem that we cannot make much impact in a world where injustice and cruelty seem to rule.

Yet we can protect and help heal the bruised reeds around us.

We can protect the struggling flames of those standing next to us.

In doing so together, we might find a way to see how God is calling us—

individually and as a congregation, as the church—to be even more fully human together,

to share the message that God's love in Christ does not grow faint and his grace is "for you"

and you and you and you and you . . .

We share this message in word and in deed  
for the sake of one another,  
for the sake of the world.

Even when that seems to fail,  
the beautiful words of the prophet Isaiah  
which rang out so long ago ring out to us now  
and they stand steadfast.

When all else seems to fail,  
we simply return to these powerful promises  
and the certain truth that this is who Jesus,  
the humble, compassionate Servant to the servants,  
is for us—for the world.

Always—because God’s love is steadfast.  
And because God is a God of second, third, fourth, fifth and  
more chances, though we stumble and fail,  
we can begin again.

We begin again by hanging onto Jesus.  
He’s the one who shines through  
and shows us the God we long for.  
He’s the one who stands in line with us at the water’s edge,  
willing to immerse himself among the bruised  
and barely flickering souls—  
all so that we might hear the only voice  
that will tell us who we are and whose we are . . .  
that we are all God’s beloved child—  
in Christ the heavens have been broken open  
and all of God’s grace and love are *for you*.

