

“And So It Begins”  
Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43;  
Matthew 3:13-17

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Happy New Year!

When my family and I arrived home from our trip a few days ago, one of the wonderful things about getting home, entering the door, is when our dog ran up to greet us. It's one of the wonderful things about having a dog. It always seems to be happy to see you. And then as you sit down and try to relax, the dog comes up and puts its head right under your hand because it wants more petting. It wants something from you.

What I was thinking about was how sometimes our pets want something from us, and it was that idea of wanting something from someone or from something that I was thinking about. Oftentimes as we go into the new year we think about the resolutions we're going to have, the new beginnings. But both of those ideas, the resolutions and the new beginnings, are really because we want something from the new year. So I feel a little bit like a dog going into the new year saying, “New year, I want something from you.”

When I really begin to think about it, I realize that the new year isn't a thing that can really give me something, but in a way, it's what I want of God. God, please make the new year better than the last one. Or, I have this particular thing in my life that I really want to do better at in the new year. We begin to think about the kinds of things we want to have happen in the new year. We want something of that new year.

If we were in Palestine around the time of Jesus' birth, I would guess that people really wanted something of the new year, as well. They were in hopes of, at some point, a Messiah coming. They had some ideas about what that might look like. The Isaiah passage that we read talks about the Messiah bringing justice to the nations. Sometimes it's translated as bringing judgment to the nations. The main thought there is the idea that perhaps God would finally show loyalty to us Judeans and lift us up and put those other nations down, so there's almost like a balance change. There's a hope that the Messiah might bring back the kingdom of David, those glory years from so many years ago.

Perhaps it's a human characteristic that we often want things to change on a dime. We want God to bring the hammer of justice, to hammer away so that things are now right. Sometimes even thinking of it perhaps as a war hammer that God would use to take those Romans and throw them out and allow us to rise up, us Judeans.

If we read the passage a little more closely, we might wonder what God is saying or what's being said by Isaiah when he says, "And the bruised reed will not be broken." The Messiah will not break the bruised reed. And the bruised reed is probably the one that breaks the easiest. There's something about that one who is coming being gentle, yet sometimes what I want of the new year, what I want of God isn't always quite that gentle. What the people wanted back then probably wasn't quite that gentle. And yet, we see in this whole Christmas story the surprising way that God enters into our world almost unannounced, almost without being seen, a gentle new presence.

Even as Jesus comes to John, John recognizes, "You're the one who comes in the name of the Lord. You're the one. I should be baptized by you." But what does Jesus say to John to convince him to go ahead and baptize him? He says, "It's proper now for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus, right here, begins to model what it means to be righteous. He knows that John has been given a ministry of repentance, of turning to God, and Jesus himself uses what John has been called to do because when Jesus comes up out of the water he is turned toward his calling, no longer doing what he had been doing. We assume that maybe he was a carpenter of some kind, a builder. But when he comes out of the water, he turns toward his God-given work.

The fascinating thing to me is that he accepts John's ministry. So often we sing about him becoming King, yet he doesn't come as a king who creates a commotion and announces his presence. In the passage it's not even clear who sees the dove coming down from heaven and how that is announced. Jesus comes and allows John to put him into the water and lift him up—not a very kingly experience at all, allowing this prophet to do that.

He comes in this gentle way, bringing the gift of God to us, helping us begin to see what righteousness means. As we listen to Peter, one who has studied under Jesus, he says, "What I've learned is that God's not partial. It's not about lifting up one nation over the others. It's about who fears God and does what is right, what is righteous. So Peter begins to extend what we see in this passage of Jesus' baptism.

Now the interesting thing is this is a gift God is giving us. As Jesus begins his ministry, it is really a gift to us—a gift of God's grace, God's love shown among us, an offering of a way to enter into the justice and righteousness of God, to enter into what God calls us to be.

I've always thought when I get a gift it's now mine; I get to use it however I want. I was listening to a book called "Braiding Sweet Grass" and she was talking about how when Native Americans gave gifts, the expectation was that the gift would be given on. It's not something that you simply say, "Now it's all mine." A gift given is in a way a

responsibility to continue giving. I think that's so much more the kind of gift God gives us—a gift we are given that we are encouraged to keep on giving.

If you look at these passages today, in each one there's what God does, there's what the Savior does, and there's what we do. It's that idea that as we receive a gift, we are also given an opportunity to share that gift.

It's easy for me to simply think about what I want out of this year and not think so much about what this year might want out of me. As we are given the gift of forgiveness, it's not only a gift of freedom *from* something; it's a freedom *for* something. It's a freedom for doing what we can do—that is to follow Jesus, to learn from him, to live as he calls us to live. It's a freedom that enables us to make mistakes and be able to try again. It's an encouragement to know that we are to try rather than feel like I'm unable to do anything or that I've failed. Well, that's only the ground to start trying again. I've failed in my garden multiple times, but I get to keep trying.

That is the wonder, I think, of what it means to say that we are given the gift and that we get to give a gift. Jesus came to his baptism so that he could turn his life and begin the ministry that is a gift to us. We come to communion, which is a gift to us about God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ, the sustaining nature of God's love and Spirit among us, which then is an opportunity for us to go from and use to share. Peter talks about sharing the good news, witnessing to Jesus, recognizing the forgiveness we're given, the peace Jesus preaches.

So I guess the idea is that not only do I want something out of this new year, perhaps this new year wants something out of me. Not only do I want something from God, but God has given us great gifts and we have the opportunity to share those gifts in this new year. Amen.