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Epiphany 1A
Peace, Seattle
January 9, 2011 epk
Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

You come to us, dear Jesus, not in a form that we had expected, nor even in a form that we had wanted. Lord, help us to see you, and in seeing you to receive you, and in receiving you to follow you, and in following you to be obedient to become a community of justice and joy. Amen.

A LORD WE DON'T EXPECT

His name is Rubin Martinez and he lives in Santa Ana, California. Born to coal mining parents in a poor, neglected section of Arizona, Reuben left his home early to look for a brighter future.

But despite landing a family wage job in East Los Angeles, Rubin hadn't yet found 'the right vocational fit,' so he quit his job to try other options until finally, in the late 1970's, he used his savings to open a barbershop in downtown Santa Ana.[1]

It was there, in his barbershop, that Rubin discovered his true vocation—as a passionate promoter of literacy.

Touched early on in life by the power of story, Rubin wanted to share that power with everyone he could. He knew that one of the best ways he could contribute to fuller lives for the young people of his community was by giving them a legacy of literacy, and so when fathers would come in for a haircut, he'd encourage them to read to their children. When young people would come in, they could hardly get out the door without a book or two under their arm.

After cutting hair for decades, Martinez moved from loaning to selling books out of his barbershop, until eventually he opened a bookstore which became a pillar of the Latino literary community.[2]

Rubin believes in the power that little changes can make in people's lives. He's seen it happen in his own and he's seen it happen in the lives of many people he serves. One of the places he's visited regularly is the prisons.

When he goes to the prisons and meets with the young men he reminds them that they are not forgotten; that they are still loved. He reminds them how their mothers and grandmothers spend hours traveling on the bus—some for great distances—in order to spend a few minutes visiting them.

He tells them that their lives are not over. That they have a choice to make about how they will respond to the circumstances they find themselves living. He tells them it's not too late to choose to give rather than take, to help rather than hurt.[3]

When I read in Isaiah,
"A BRUISED REED HE WILL NOT BREAK; A DIMLY BURNING WICK HE WILL NOT EXTINGUISH,"
I think of servants like Rubin.

Our 1st reading from Isaiah 42 is the first of four "servant songs" sprinkled throughout chapters 40-55.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rueben_Martinez
[2] From Tony Barboza's column in the Los Angeles Times, December 27, 2008. For the whole column go to: http://articles.latimes.com/print/2008/dec/27/local/me-chapman27 Martinez was thrust into the national spotlight in 2004 when the MacArthur Foundation awarded him a $500,000 fellowship for promoting literacy.
[3] I originally heard about Rubin in a story on NPR January 4, 2002. For a more recent interview with Mr. Martinez by NOW program host by David Brancaccio, go to: http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/martinez.html

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Here in this first song God lays out the job description of his servant. This job description is so astonishing that the prophet fears we may not hear it, so the words echo three times in four verses:
Verse 1: BRING FORTH JUSTICE TO THE NATIONS
Verse 2: FAITHFULLY BRING FORTH JUSTICE
Verse 3: ESTABLISH JUSTICE IN THE EARTH.

What is this justice Isaiah is talking about?
"Justice," writes William Willimon, "is another way of saying that God's primary will is to repair the creation, to make humanity and all creation the way God intended it to be at the beginning."[4]

This sounds like a good thing, of course, until we realize how much we have invested in the way things are now instead of the way God intended things to be.

In repairing creation, the servant is not to swing a rod of iron and smash the nations like so much fragile pottery. HE COMES NOT AS A MILITARY CONQUEROR BUT AS A GENTLE GARDENER AND A LAMP LIGHTER.[5]
"A bruised reed he will not break. A dimly burning wick he will not extinguish."

God's tactics are not what we expect.

The vulnerable ones—who the world would just as soon cast aside as worthless, worn out, useless, obsolete—God's Servant shelters, nurtures, tends to. How contrary this is from the ways of the world.

This is an image of gentleness, patience, persistence, and a willingness to abide and even to shelter vulnerability.

When Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were writing down their stories of Jesus, they turned often to the prophet Isaiah, because in the voice of the prophet, and in the Servant Songs in particular, they kept seeing the face of Jesus.

How do you write a story about a God who became a man who, when push came to shove, was committed to giving his own life rather than taking another's?

Today as Jesus begins his ministry we find him poised before John, mid-thigh in the Jordan River.

When John found Jesus among the crowds receiving baptism—which had been advertised as a baptism of repentance, of turning—John was surprised. It seemed to him that they were going about the whole thing backwards: it was Jesus, not him, who should be doing the baptizing.

Later on, after Jesus had gathered the twelve around himself and was beginning to make waves in Galilee, John sent some of his own disciples to Jesus with a question: **Are you the one? Or should we wait for another?**

Perhaps the ministry tactics Jesus' was employing were different from those John anticipated when he spoke about throwing the chaff into unquenchable fire. Perhaps the work of God in Jesus was so new, that even John could not fully recognize it.

[4] William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource. 30:1*, p. 10.
[5] Ibid.

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But Jesus' response to the question, "are you the one", left no doubt:

> GO TELL JOHN WHAT YOU HEAR AND SEE: THE BLIND RECEIVE THEIR SIGHT, THE LAME WALK, THE LEPERS ARE CLEANSED, THE DEAF HEAR, THE DEAD ARE RAISED, AND THE POOR HAVE GOOD NEWS BROUGHT TO THEM. AND BLESSED IS ANYONE WHO TAKES NO OFFENSE AT ME. [Matt 11:2-6]

Today as we stand at the Jordan River with John and Jesus, they summon us to reorient our lives around what God intends; to reorient our lives around the servanthood of which Isaiah speaks.

This is precisely what the sacrament of baptism is about.
Baptism is a lifelong sacrament, a lifelong rebirth, a lifelong orientation. God's covenant with us in baptism extends throughout the whole of our existence and even beyond.

We've learned from the catacombs and burials of the earliest Christians, that they counted their age from the date of their baptism. There are burials with adults' bones that declare the age of the interred to be in the single digits. Is there a better expression of the conviction that one's past is as nothing, and that knowing Christ everything.[6]

Friday afternoon, in Eleanor Cowell's hospital room at Swedish, I traced the sign of the cross on her forehead, reminding her of the promises God made to her in baptism.

Christ will accompany her to the end of her life journey and beyond, just as he accompanied Borden Sagmoen, whose earthly life ended New Year's Day, and just as he accompanies all those whom we will name in our prayers today, all who have been touched by the water and the word.

The mark of the cross of Christ upon us is a mark that never fades away.
The spirit which enters our lives in baptism is a Spirit which never loosens God's claim upon our lives, no matter how bruised or dimly burning we might become.

Remember your baptism today. Remind your children of their baptism. Trace the sign of the cross on their foreheads at bath time or bedtime. Spouses, trace the sign on each other as you say GOODNIGHT.

Whenever you touch water today, remember the covenant God has made with you, and the promise that God will never forsake you.

And remember too, that you are part of a community which stretches across time and space, part of a community which has been planted in this place to serve, to help bring justice and wholeness to birth within the lives of those who surround you, whose lives intersect with your own.

Touched by God, our hands are joined to the hands of others as we move beyond the water's edge to bring the light, to speak the promise, to be the signs of God's presence. For this we are named and claimed as children of God.

AMEN.

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[6] Dale C. Allison, *New Proclamation,* Marshall D. Johnson, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p.90.