

## What We Can Imagine

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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The scripture this morning is from the prophet Isaiah...addressed to the people of Israel in exile. They are a captured people in a foreign land.

Listen now to these words from the prophet Isaiah.

### **Isaiah 42:1-9**

*<sup>1</sup> Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

*<sup>2</sup> He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup>  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

*<sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

*<sup>5</sup>Thus says God, the LORD,  
who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it:*

*<sup>6</sup> I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations, <sup>7</sup>  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

*<sup>8</sup> I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.*

*<sup>9</sup> See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;*

*before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.*

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I was part of a church small group many years ago...it was a group of adults interested in deepening our spiritual lives through faith practices. The second week we gathered, the leader invited us to reflect together on grace as the grounding of our identities.

"In a world that pronounces so many of us '*not good enough*,' the leader asked, "what might it mean to believe/trust that we are upheld and chosen...that in us God finds delight?"

We were then asked to remember our baptisms.... to dip our fingers in baptismal waters and one by one, turn to the person beside us, take their wet hands and proclaim God's blessing on them:

Jessica—You are my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

Betsy—You are my chosen...

Phil—You are my chosen...

And on and on....around the circle.

Joanna, Dan, Bill, Katherine....You are my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

I still remember the tears that streamed down faces and voices cracking as we went around the circle.

I don't know exactly why that experience was so emotional for so many of us, but I suspect it is because those words, that blessing, affirmed something deep within each person. We don't often receive that kind of affirmation. Much more often we receive the message that we're not quite good enough.

We are so used to be graded and compared.

We are used to having our thoughts and images and videos liked or not, shared or not, followed or not.

We are used to having a multi-billion dollar industry on Madison Avenue convince us we aren't good enough so that they can sell us a product that will make us better.

We are so used to this world in which status and skin color and gender identity and charisma and education and money and power define our worth.

“You are God’s chosen. You are a DELIGHT to God.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s a counter-cultural affirmation.

Isaiah’s prophecy talks of closeness and delight, but it also talks about bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks.

If I’m honest, that imagery connects with me more readily.

And I wonder if that’s not a little bit true for many of us in the wake of the last two and a half years and all that they have held.

There has been so much change and loss and reckoning and awakening... for individuals, for communities, for churches, for countries.

I feel a little more bruised and dim than chosen and a delight.

For years, educator and researcher Dr. Pauline Boss has been studying “ambiguous loss.” Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear and without official verification or immediate resolution. In 2021, Dr. Boss published a book called “The Myth of Closure” in which she writes about how the COVID-19 pandemic has left many of us haunted by feelings of anxiety, despair, and even anger.<sup>2</sup>

In one section of the book Dr. Boss listed out twenty or so pandemic-related losses, one after another. Things like:

1. Loss of certainty about safety and health for yourself and family
2. Loss of routines
3. Loss of playdates and at-school learning
4. Loss of parental time and freedom to go to work due to the need for at-home schooling
5. Loss of ability to be with a loved one who is hospitalized and/or dying

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<sup>1</sup> God makes these affirmations of the Servant in Isaiah’s prophecy.

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;*

Scholars have debated long and well the identity of this servant. Christians tend to think this Servant is Jesus. The Gospel writers wove these lines into Jesus’ baptism, and into the ways Jesus names and fulfills his ministry. But we would be missing something important to stop with Jesus – to think that the affirmation belongs to him exclusively. Certainly Jesus is affirmed as God’s chosen, but it extends beyond Jesus, to all of us who belong to God. That’s what baptism reminds us – that in the waters of baptism we are joined with the Body of Christ in the church. We receive affirmation that we, too, are God’s chosen. We are a delight to God.

<sup>2</sup> Boss, Pauline. *The Myth of Closure*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2021.

6. Loss of ability to celebrate or mourn major life events—births, graduations, marriages, deaths, etc., in community with others
7. Loss of ability to attend large events—concerts, sports, lectures, reunions, church
8. Loss of control of how much time is spent with partner and children (too much, too little)
9. Loss of trust in the world as a fair and just place
10. Loss of trust in leaders and authorities
11. Loss of freedom to move about as we please
12. We could add more...

We've all known everything turned upside-down, but it was startling to me when I read the list all at once, just how much loss has occurred. And while I wouldn't characterize the last few years as ones marked only by loss — there was much joy and much to be grateful for, too — it's helpful to be reminded that it is reasonable and appropriate if we're feeling a little bruised. A little like a dimly burning wick.

That's why it matters that this scripture was originally given to people in exile. Isaiah spoke it to the people of Israel after the fall of Jerusalem. They had been displaced from their home. They had been made captive. They had lost a tremendous amount. They were bruised and beaten down. They were, no doubt, afraid, anxious, and angry. And I imagine they wanted things back. I suspect their deepest hopes were to have their Temple rebuilt and their sovereignty restored. A return to normalcy. That's the promise they wanted to hear from the prophet.

God doesn't give them what they want. God doesn't return them to normal, to what was.

But the good news is that God invites them to imagine new things,  
 To help create new things.  
 God calls these exiles to powerful hope,  
 rooted in God's purposes<sup>3</sup> —  
 of working for justice  
 and restoring sight.  
 in bringing light to the dark places of human distress,  
 in freeing those who are imprisoned.

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<sup>3</sup> This insight is Walter Brueggemann's. I am unable to find the direct citation.

If I understand this text, Isaiah's prophecy is supposed to remind the exiles that they are God's chosen and then immediately call on us to imagine the new things God is bringing forth.

"Take comfort; you are mine." God says.

"Now join me in bringing light and sight and freedom into the world."

One of my favorite things about living in this city is its architecture and its monuments. I can't help but be inspired and reinvested in our democratic process when I walk on the Capitol grounds. My mood and my step get a boost when the turnaround point on a run is Mr. Lincoln and the words of his Gettysburg address, reminding us of the sacrifice of so many and calling us to "a new birth of freedom."

That is no accident. David Burnham, the architect of Union Station once said, "Make no little plans. They have no magic to stir men's [sic] blood."

Friends, I think Isaiah knows we are bruised and dim and the prophecy intends to stir our blood. To inspire us. To spark our imaginations.

God invites to imagine:

justice for the nations

sight for those who cannot see

freedom for those in chains and

light in places of darkness.

Living into that bold vision might be what makes new things possible.

And let me tell you what I see.

I see a group of people who are deeply concerned that families who have fled political violence and made it to this country are sleeping on floors and in hotel rooms, not able to make a new life. And so you have organized yourself to invest in healing and a new beginning — setting up apartments for these refugees. Helping them get internet access and drivers' licenses and kids enrolled in school. Helping with job searches and english classes. Helping them know they are not alone.

Imagine that. You are light in places of darkness.

I see a church who invested more than \$100,000 last year in families east of the Anacostia River who were teetering on the edge of survival. During the depths of the pandemic you provided cash assistance to families and these families were able to do

things like pay rent, buy food, invest in their businesses, fix a car so they could get to work. Those payments enabled families to have better mental health and less hunger during an economic crisis when they could have easily fallen through the cracks. And you granted them the dignity of direct cash assistance, trusting they would know best the needs of their family.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine that. You loosened the chains of generational poverty and disinvestment.

I see a community of people who WANT to be with and for one another. To care and love one another. I've seen you celebrate with one another and extend real gratitude to Emma and Cheni at their departures and to Camille in her ongoing ministry here. I've seen you show up to grieve together when the unthinkable happens. I've seen you roll with punches. I've seen you laugh and sing and cry and pray.

Imagine that. A church alive with the breath of God.

There is work ahead of us. As Camille said last week at the Town Hall meeting, we are not what we once were as a congregation in terms of numbers or attendance. And every religious historian and sociologist and presbytery leader I know is saying it's not going back to what it was. There's no return to normal. We can't program our way back to what we were before.

And we're not what we once were as individuals either. The last two and a half years and all they have held have changed us. There's no return to normal.

But, church — God invites us to imagine what might become new!  
That newness will involve vulnerability and risk and deepened relationships.  
It will involve a bold vision of sight and light and freedom.  
And I don't suppose it will be easy.

But the God who invites us to this imagining is one of power —  
*who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
who gives breath to the people upon it  
and spirit to those who walk in it.*

And more importantly, Isaiah reminds us, God is with us.

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<sup>4</sup> See the evaluation and report of this project: [https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/an-evaluation-of-thrive-east-of-the-river\\_0.pdf](https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/an-evaluation-of-thrive-east-of-the-river_0.pdf)

*I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you.*

We are not alone. With faith, with risk, with imagination, with bold service, we will find our new way.

Now to the One, who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Amen.