

January 16, 2011

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 49.1-7

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When I originally looked at this set of lessons, somewhere in my 98th hour of ice-bound captivity, sitting amidst the utter wreck that is my house with two bored-out-of-their-skulls whirling dervish children, the words of the Psalmist spoke directly to my ear: "I waited patiently for the Lord... and He drew me up out of the desolate pit."

Like many of you, it has been a long week in my household.

But truthfully, when I pull myself out of the cabin fever and look back on the last week, I have to admit it was a really really good week. A gift even. Overall, as much as we Atlantans were stymied by this bizarre turn of events, it could have been much worse. The net result was that we couldn't go anywhere. But we kept our power, the shelter system worked as best it could, we were, for the most part, smart enough not to drive on the icy streets. The city shut down for a few days. And we're okay.

And in my house we're even better than okay. The reason it is such a mess is because we spent four days playing, cooking, reading, dancing, drawing, watching movies. In our world, that is what we call resting. It was, in truth, holy time.

Our selection from the Old Testament this morning is from one of Isaiah's "servant songs" where the prophet Isaiah is reminding the people what it means to be called by God into service. And it is a tall order! Formed in the womb to serve God, and not only to serve him by bringing back those who have wandered away, but also to be a light to everyone, a light so comforting, so appealing, that it draws people in from the ends of the earth. To be a servant of God, says Isaiah, means that the most powerful will be brought to their knees.

Isaiah does not pull his punches. Isaiah reminds us, modern-day servants of God, that God asks much of us. And we know that. I know many of you, like me, struggle with balancing what God asks of you with what the world asks of you.

The world asks us to do a lot. We have to keep our kids fed and clothed, we have to run households, we have to follow the office rules and keep our bosses happy. We have to care for aging parents and balance our checkbooks. It is difficult work when times are good and it is close to impossible to keep going when times are difficult. There is a lot to do. All the time.

And it can be hard to manage that alongside what God calls us to do as servants and disciples. We are clothing the poor and feeding the hungry, uplifting the

sorrowful, bringing people into the warmth and promise of the light of God. We are called into this important work alongside the mundane work we do to keep ourselves and our families alive.

We are called into all kinds of important contracts and necessities. This "doing" is important for the world to keep spinning and for the work of God to get done. There would be no Threads if we weren't doing the good work needed to clothe those kids. The Giffords and Green families would not know how much the country supports them if someone had not organized that wonderful service of remembrance. Our kids wouldn't get fed if we didn't cook them dinner, bless their hearts!

The servant songs in Isaiah do not pretend that a call into servanthood, what we term "discipleship" will be easy. And we know that part, too. For Isaiah, the difficulty was that the servant was despised for his faith, "deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, slave of rulers." I think for us, the challenge is not in being despised as much as it is finding the balance in all that is required of us, by God and by the world.

The world is made better by our presence in it. The Kingdom is made closer by our participation in bringing it. That is what disciples do. It is not an easy task, but then, no one promised the Gospel would be easy.

I thank God for the strong challenge of Isaiah, for his plain speak. The call of the servant song reminds us that God is relying on us as much as the more obvious needs of the world around us. That is the message I hear from today's Old Testament lesson.

But I think there's a message from this week's storm, too, since Scripture is not the only place we look to learn about the nature of God.

Amidst all of the DOING, sometimes I think God calls us to stop.
Stop.
Stop and rest, whatever rest looks like in your life.

In the Bible, it is called Sabbath, though we Christians generally have not done very well with that concept. While I don't ever think that God "sends" major weather events to teach us lessons, I do think that God has used this particular one, dramatic in its ability to shut down our city, to tell us to open up a can of soup, sit down and cool it.

And we did.

I know we rested because I talked to some of you about what you did over those days this week. I know you, too, sledded and played, you knitted and read through that stack of books by the bed. Maybe you prayed. You checked your email only to see if the office and school would be closed again tomorrow. And

when it was you, like me, were a little conflicted about it: there is, after all, so much work to do. But oh well. Another forced day of rest it is.

I am aware that no storm is perfect and this one caused hardship for some, but for many of us, we took the gift of Sabbath with gratefulness and as a reminder that while there is so much good and holy work to be done, even disciples need to rest. Let's do our best not to forget it.