

*Destiny, Choice, and Justice*

---

Isaiah 49:1-7

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent  
The Community Church of Sebastopol  
United Church of Christ  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – January 15, 2017

I.

During the season of Epiphany, also known as the season of light, the church takes time to consider the meaning of the Incarnation.

Incarnation means not only the birth of Jesus – whom the church confesses to be Messiah, Savior, and Son of God – but also the baptism of Jesus, the life and ministry of Jesus.

Some theologians observe that the incarnation is made complete on the cross.

In Christ, God enters creation and is willing to go “all the way” for humanity, even to death on a cross.

During Epiphany, the church’s work is to wonder about this “God with flesh on,” a God who is willing to live and to die right here in the midst of the best and the worst of our earthly life.

Epiphany *this* year coincides with events and anniversaries within our wider culture.

A new year has begun, tomorrow we honor the legacy of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the inauguration of a new president is on Friday, Women’s Marches will be happening around the country on Saturday, and next Sunday marks the 44<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the historic Roe versus Wade Supreme Court decision granting women the freedom to terminate a pregnancy.

While a lot is happening within a short amount of time, the church’s proclamation is that God, in Christ, by the Holy Spirit, is right here with us in the middle of it all.

This morning I’d like to take a risk as your still relatively new Senior Minister and continue my custom of preaching on the importance of Reproductive Freedom from a Christian perspective.

I do so keenly aware that some of you in this congregation may disagree not only with what I have to say, but with my decision to say it in a sermon.

Nevertheless, I would betray the church’s understanding of preaching if I were to avoid difficult and even controversial issues such as a woman’s right to choose.

The betrayal would be no less if I sought to marginalize those with different opinions, so please know that is not my intention.

I have prayed on and wrestled with this sermon and offer it without claiming a final word of God.

In fact, as I sometimes say, if there is a word that God would have us hear, may the Spirit help us to hear *that* word, and to forget all the rest.

## II.

To lay my homiletical cards on the table, I believe a case can and should be made from a Christian perspective that decisions about reproductive health are best made by individuals rather than mandated by the state.

For this reason, it seems odd that those Christians who hold anti-choice views tend to be the same who advocate vociferously for individual liberties.

As I understand it, they are speaking up for the unborn life which has no voice.

They have chosen to value the life of the fetus over the choice of the woman whose body carries it.

I appreciate compassion for vulnerable life, and yet there are situations when the choice to terminate a pregnancy is the best decision.

I would rather entrust that decision to a woman, within her own support system, than to legislators, most of whom are privileged men.

Throughout history, women have a very good track record when it comes to making decisions about preserving life, especially compared with men.

For millennia, women have been making decisions about their own reproductive health and they will continue to do so.

The question is whether we will trust and support them with those decisions or whether we will criminalize them for it.

In other words, the option is not pro-life or pro-abortion, it is pro-choice or anti-choice.

Rich women will, of course, always have greater access to reproductive health services.

Limiting safe, legal access to abortion will disproportionately burden poor women who lack power and resources.

From a Christian point of view, we should protect vulnerable life by reducing the number of abortions by providing safe, legal, affordable access to healthcare, including effective birth control, quality pre- and post-natal care, and, when necessary, abortion services.

## III.

If you listened to this morning's words from the prophet Isaiah, you may question whether this is the best text to invoke a Christian view of reproductive freedom.

Nevertheless, this text speaks to us of three themes that relate very closely to the question of reproductive freedom: destiny, choice, and justice.

The first 7 verses of chapter 49 comprise the second of three "Servant Songs" in Isaiah.

These Servant Songs are found in what scholars call Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, written to the Jewish exiles in Babylon.

Isaiah is giving encouragement to the exiles and proclaiming that their salvation, that is, their restoration to Jerusalem, is near.

Isaiah speaks simultaneously to the exiles and to the peoples from far away.

In other words, the salvation of which Isaiah speaks has significance not only for those who will be restored, but also for the surrounding nations.

Isaiah encourages the exiles by placing their plight within a much wider frame.

### ***Destiny***

Next, Isaiah's poetry invokes these words speaking of his destiny as a prophet: "The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me." This is a beautiful articulation of the human awareness that I am called or destined to something important.

But this is one of those verses sometimes used to "prove" that every pregnancy should be brought to term because God has a plan for each of us, a plan we dare not abort lest we interfere with God's purposes.

There are at least three problems with using this as a proof text to deny reproductive freedom.

The first is that it raises the question of miscarriages. Those of us who have suffered the grief of a miscarriage are left to wonder who is responsible for *that* lost destiny.

The second is that it denies the personhood of the mother whose womb the prophet mentions. Was her only destiny to bring children into the world?

And third, this text is a song describing a sense of calling and purpose for the prophet and the people Israel. It is not meant to limit women's options for reproductive health. Destiny is not a simple equation. It involves unchosen life circumstances in relationship to the choices we make with the lives God gives us.

### ***Choice***

The issue of choice comes up in these verses as well, specifically the end of verse 7: "The Holy One of Israel has chosen you."

Part of the Jewish and Christian understand of God is that God is in some sense personal, that God has preferences and makes choices.

God is not required, *per se*, to do anything.

As Walter Brueggemann once put it, "God has a life of God's own."

This is different from the Greek understanding of the gods, each of whom were constrained by a wider order.

The God of Israel and the Church created the order of the universe and does not abandon it, but neither can God simply be equated with the sum of all that is. This could be what it means to say that God created humankind, woman and man, in God's own image.

That is, God gave humans free will and trusted humans to use it, guiding and admonishing them, but also allowing them to enjoy and suffer the natural consequences of their decisions.

Yes, parents, God articulated the original Love & Logic philosophy.

God didn't have to choose Israel, but God did.

God didn't have to show up in the birth, life, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, but God did.

The scriptures are teeming with examples of people making un-coerced choices.

Mary does not have to bear the Messiah into the world. An early church thinker suggested that Mary may not have been the first woman Gabriel approached.

Perhaps he approached many who chose to say no before Mary said "yes."

Jesus does not have to die on a cross, but that is the path he chooses, and in John 16, Jesus compares his suffering on the cross to a woman in labor. Would he deny her the freedom to choose that God gave him facing death on a cross?

### ***Justice***

That God has preferences and chooses is a basis of the movement known as Liberation Theology which claims, boldly, that while God loves all, sending rain on the just and unjust, God maintains a "preferential option for the poor."

The Servant Songs of Isaiah are one place liberation theologians have pointed to make their case.

In the face of exile and exploitation, of having lost their homeland and their culture, the word God gives to the writer of Second Isaiah is not, "Just wait till you're back in charge. You'll dominate those who dominate you."

No, the Word of God in these verses is "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

Through the prophet, God gives a new vision of *servant* leadership, of service from the underside of history, of gathering those who have been scattered, of binding those who have been wounded, of raising up and restoring those who have been cast aside.

As servants, not overlords, the people of Israel are being given "as a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

This unconventional vision of leadership was later adopted by the early Christian church, which looked at Jesus and said:

“He’s a King, but a King who prefers no thrones; a Savior, but a Savior who rescues by giving himself away; a Messiah, but a Messiah who comes to town on a donkey instead of a war horse; a Son of God, but a Son of God who comes as a servant, ministering to the poor and the outcast, the blind and the deaf, prostitutes and tax collectors, peasants and paupers.”

When the early church considered Isaiah’s description of God’s Holy One as “one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers,” it thought, that sounds like Jesus.

During Epiphany, the church discovers that the incarnation not only means that Jesus embodies God, but that Jesus embodies God’s *justice* for the vulnerable, for unborn life when possible, yes, but more so for already-born women who find themselves in vulnerable, difficult, even desperate circumstances and who deserve society’s respect, care, and support as they make and live with the best decisions they know how to make.

#### IV.

Rev. Dr. Amy K. Butler is the Senior Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City.

She says that “along my journey of life, clarity about direction, purpose, and call have often come to me by way of study, reflection, prayer and, most often, my community.”

Supported by her local congregation and the wider Christian community, Amy Butler shared a story with USA Today last October about her choice to have a late term abortion, which she called “one of the most agonizing experiences of my life and a true lesson in the reality that life is not always as clear-cut and obvious as you might think it is.”

Rev. Butler chose to share her story in response to comments made by the man who will be inaugurated as our next president this Friday.

Hers was an act of courage to break the silence and refuse to be shamed by those who would deny her and other women the freedom to make important private decisions about reproductive health.

I encourage you to read her story for yourself, and to consider the following powerful cluster of relationships:

Rev. Amy Butler serves the Riverside Church where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his powerful speech against the Vietnam War entitled “A Time to Break the Silence” on April 4, 1967, exactly one year before his assassination.

Just less than one year before that, on May 5, 1966, Dr. King accepted the Margaret Sanger award named after the founder of Planned Parenthood.

In his acceptance speech, Dr. King said, “Margaret Sanger had to commit what was then called a crime in order to enrich humanity, and today we honor her courage and

vision; for without them there would have been no beginning... in the struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action."

V.

Our God is a God of grace. We are saved by that grace, not by anything we do or fail to do.

One of God's gracious gifts to every person is free will and the promise never to abandon us, no matter our choices nor the consequences of our choices.

Jesus, the suffering servant, has come among us, God with us,  
to share in the beauty and the difficulty of human living,  
to sanctify all of life with his presence,  
and to transform our hearts to have compassion for ourselves and others.  
Amen.