

## **“Annual Renewal – Second Reminder!”**

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the bearing of these words, that we might open our minds  
and our hearts to your renewing Spirit and receive your blessings in your time. In Jesus' name  
we pray, Amen.*

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Have you noticed that we've been living in the midst of a high pressure system? I'm not talking about the weather, mind you, I'm talking about the intensity of the overlap of the holiday season with the end and then beginning of the year. It seems like everyone wants a piece of you, and they're filling up your mail box and your email inbox and your social media feeds with their requests. Meanwhile, we're just recovering from the commercial aspects of Christmas, when pressure to find the right gifts and make everything beautiful and feel cheery can be overwhelming. And then – bam! – it's time to assess all the ways your life has been deficient and make a bunch of New Year's resolutions you'll forget about within a couple weeks. Why do we live this way? How is it that our human ways of organizing time seem designed to impose such pressure?

“Annual Renewal – Second Reminder!” could be the subject line of multiple different emails I've received over the past 3 weeks. It could have been printed on the front of some of the mail I've gotten that went straight into the recycling box. It's a familiar phrase, and it has the capacity to elicit a knee-jerk reaction of rejection. If

you've had to remind me a second time, it seems likely that I'm not really planning on renewing, doesn't it? Except they know that we're harried and forgetful, so maybe some of those reminders are effective. Why else would they keep trying?

But today, I want to take that phrase and turn it inside out. Because our scriptures today, in partnership with our liturgical calendar, are indeed offering us a second reminder of an opportunity for annual renewal. This renewal isn't something you sign up for, and it's certainly not something that requires paying dues or making your annual membership donation. This renewal is the for real kind: the refreshment of the soul offered by Christ Jesus.

We're at the second reminder because the first reminder was the whole Christmas story that we just went through. We looked at Elizabeth & Zechariah and Mary & Joseph and remembered how their lives were upended by unexpected mysteries. We were invited to imagine what could happen if we opened ourselves up to the mysterious work of God in our midst. We welcomed the Christ Child and remembered that true hospitality is not about the beauty of the decorations, but about offering others what they truly need. So often, renewal is about getting outside of ourselves, extending our view beyond our own circumstances, which, in turn, helps us recognize the depth of the blessings we already have.

But in case all that Incarnation joy and celebration didn't leave you feeling refreshed, here we are on "Baptism of the Lord" Sunday with another chance! It's our Second Reminder about our Annual Renewal! But rather than feeling pressured,

let's slow down for a moment and look at what we're really being invited into.

Because it's definitely not about high pressure tactics or junk mail. It's not necessarily even on a schedule; at least not the kind of schedule humans try to impose upon our lives.

What do we mean when we say "renewal" in the context of our faith? I find that I use the phrase "newness of life in Christ" a lot, but I'm not always very explicit about what it refers to. So let's think about what it might be. A lightness of heart, rooted in a deep trust in God's goodness, no matter what may be happening in our lives. An unwavering passion for justice and continued commitment to working toward it, even when the road is bumpy and set-backs keep coming. A moment when nothing in front of you has perhaps changed, but your perspective shifts such that you are seeing the beauty of it all in a new way.

And how does this renewal come into our lives? Well, it's certainly not because we jump into action when someone prods us with a "second reminder!" Let's look a little more deeply into the One who is the Source of this renewal. The "Servant Songs" from the book of Isaiah have long been seen by Christians as foreshadowing of Jesus, though clearly that was not their original purpose. The Hebrew people for whom they were written had been through the ringer. The ravages of exile, no doubt, wore down their souls in ways we can barely imagine. So these beautiful passages about the Messiah appearing as a Suffering Servant can be a little surprising. You would think there would be a societal craving for retribution. But instead Isaiah

offered something else. Though there is repeated mention of coming justice, the methods of this Messiah are a bit unexpected. And whether it was the original purpose or not, we see them reflected in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

“A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” Isaiah speaks to a gentleness that is just as counter-cultural now as it was then. This Messiah does not make demands or force compliance. This Messiah does not loudly interrupt your regular programming, but rather seeps into your consciousness like the dawn. This Messiah does not enact justice upon us, but rather shows us what justice looks like by living it out.

The renewal offered by Christ doesn't knock the wind out of us, but rather fills us with the Breath of Life. This newness of life isn't about all our problems being solved, but rather about offering us the hope of working to address them together in community. There are a lot of things about this Messiah that aren't what we might expect, and the contrast is glorious!

Did you hear how surprised John was, when Jesus showed up to be baptized? What? How? Why would you possibly think you should be baptized by me, when everything I've been doing has been about preparing all these other folks for the glory of your arrival? It didn't occur to any of us (and still doesn't) that the Messiah comes in humility. “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” “Why would I not,” Jesus seems to be asking. This is how we show our submission to God's will, which is what this whole project is about.

And indeed, it seems that even Jesus could be renewed. “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” the voice said. How many times did Jesus need to think back to that moment later, when things got hard? How many times did he need to turn to that renewing moment, to keep his spirit focused on the work of redemption he was doing?

And of course, if he needed it, we should assume that we do too. Do you remember your baptism? Do you remember thinking about it later, as you grew older and thought more deeply about what it means? Though we baptize once, we know that certain moments are held eternal in memory, which is how the renewing power of our baptisms keeps hold of us. Remembering your baptism this day is your second reminder that Jesus is offering you renewal. Not pressuring, not forcing, but inviting. This is Jesus, who is gentle and humble of heart. No matter how bruised or dim you may feel, he will not knock you down or stamp you out, but rather bring you into the light and the breeze and the newness of the dawn. Maybe in a sudden moment, or maybe in a slow unfolding over a period of weeks, as you open your eyes to see differently and open your heart to the new things God is unveiling around you.

This newness, too, is a mystery. We cannot force it. We cannot make it happen. We can merely open ourselves to its arrival, however and whenever it comes. It may not be comfortable, as Mary reminded us in her song about the mighty being brought down from their thrones, and as Isaiah’s image of bring prisoners being brought out into the light shows. Light can hurt your eyes when you’ve been in the

darkness for so long. It may require us to submit our will in ways we're resistant to, ways that seem to turn hierarchies upside down, as Jesus requesting that John baptize him did. But being uncomfortable is not the same as being broken. Our Savior is gentle and humble of heart. The renewal he offers will arrive the same way. The newness of life we gain will flow through and beyond us in the same way. Let us recall the story of the Christ Child and rejoice. Let us remember our baptisms, and give thanks! Let us walk in newness of life and know ourselves beloved of our gentle and humble Savior. Hallelujah and Amen.