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## “Living in Pattern” Isaiah 42:1-9

One week ago, my family gathered in Kansas City, Missouri, to celebrate Christmas—but more importantly, to celebrate my parents’ 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. Christmas comes but once a year, as the saying goes, but a golden anniversary is once in a lifetime and only then if you’re lucky. So I hope Baby Jesus will forgive our skewed priorities just this once!

Because I’m a knitter and we had nearly 40 total hours of road trip driving ahead of us, I naturally took along a sweater project to work on. I made sure all the tricky parts were done before we left, so all I had to do in the car was what knitwear designers call “knitting in pattern.” Knitting in pattern means that whatever stitch you see in the previous row, you make that same stitch again. If you worked a v-shaped knit stitch the last time around, you work in pattern to make another knit stitch in the row above it. When you get to a purl bump in the row below, you work in pattern and purl another stitch on the current row. Knitting in pattern is easy if you can “read your work”—that is, if you can recognize the difference between knit and purl stitches—you can knit in pattern without needing to refer to the written instructions. It’s a great skill for long, boring car rides, like the ride from DC to KC.

When I was growing up we moved a lot, but no matter where we lived, we went back to Kansas City for Christmas. Every time we were there, we’d visit the cemetery where my grandfather is buried. We’d visit my great-aunts and -uncles in their homes full of faded photographs and family heirlooms. We’d get temporarily reacquainted with our cousins, who were growing up and away just like we were. Our trip this year felt like “knitting in pattern,” or maybe Christmas-ing in pattern. All my grandparents are gone now, and so are my great-aunts and -uncles—that loving extended family who witnessed my parents joining their lives together fifty years ago. But in many ways this trip felt just like every

Kansas City Christmas of my childhood: we got reacquainted around the table with folks we hadn't seen in years, even decades, and we felt the absence of those who were missing. We hugged each other and exclaimed at how we've changed and how we've stayed the same and how big the kids have grown. We said out loud the things we have in common and kept our mouths shut about the things we knew would ignite conflict. Just like every Christmas, just like every visit. And I'm guessing just like every family.

Maybe you saw it too over the holiday season, wherever you were gathered, whoever you were with, whatever you were remembering. Maybe, like me, you looked around a table and saw where you came from, patterns that were set in place long before you came into the picture, patterns that knit together the generations of your family.

In the season of Advent here at Faith, we explored the theme "From Generation to Generation." We've officially finished Advent now, and Christmas has come and gone, all twelve days of it, but we know that "from generation to generation" never really ends. Our own stories continue, just as Jesus's does. On January 6, Epiphany, we remembered how the magi visited the holy family and brought the child Jesus some rather odd gifts and then went "home by another way" to avoid King Herod's horrors.

After the magi's journey, in one short chapter, Matthew tells a bunch of stories: of Herod's violent fury, of the holy family's escape to Egypt as refugees, and of their eventual safe return to Judea after the awful king's death. Then, in the blink of an eye—the way all children seem to grow up—by chapter 3, Baby Jesus has become a man, and he goes to the riverside where his cousin John the Baptist is hanging out proclaiming the kingdom to come. All four Gospel writers describe Jesus's baptism by John; Matthew's version is surprisingly brief, just five verses. Listen to Matthew 3:13-17:

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented.

<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

It is fitting that every year on the first Sunday of the season of Epiphany we remember Jesus's baptism. This is his first adult action, as far as the Bible records it. Mary and Joseph had received angelic messages that prepared them for their unique child, but this is apparently the first time Jesus gets a divine direct message that he is God's beloved Son. Talk about a lightbulb moment! Talk about an epiphany!

But—to quote a certain pastor, not to mention any names—“*I wonder*” if this is really when Jesus first understands who he is and what he is called to do? Because, as we saw as we awaited his arrival during Advent, Jesus didn’t suddenly appear on the scene out of nowhere. He was part of a family of faith, a biological lineage and a spiritual ancestry. He was part of a pattern that God had been—dare I say *knitting*—from generation to generation.

In Kansas City last week, that’s exactly what I saw in real life, in real time. Just being there reminded me of visiting the grave of the grandfather I never knew. He owned a stamp and coin store; maybe it’s perfectly in pattern that one of my favorite places in DC is the National Postal Museum. It reminded me of my grandmother, the quilter, who was always busy with her hands; maybe it’s perfectly in pattern that I too am always stitching. I watched my kids getting to know their great-aunts and -uncles and their cousins and it reminded me how perfectly in pattern this visit was. It also reminded me that they’ll have to learn to see the pattern for themselves.

Of all the many patterns that shape our lives, some patterns are simple and delightful, like stamps and stitching. But the truth is, some are painful patterns that we cannot change; we have to learn to work them with gentle care, to accommodate them even when it is hard to accept them. We know some are harmful patterns that must be recognized so they can be broken, turned into something new or unraveled completely. And we know some are patterns we can trust, patterns we can learn to read so we can take up the work and continue them faithfully, one stitch at a time, like the Scripture we heard this morning from Isaiah 42. This is one of four “servant songs” in the book of Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah lived around seven centuries—many, many generations—before Jesus came into the picture. Isaiah’s prophecies span the time when the people of Israel lived in exile in Babylon, and Isaiah proclaimed messages of both judgment and hope to God’s oppressed and dispersed people. The “servant song” in Isaiah 42 describes a special servant of God who will “bring forth justice to the nations,” who will “not cry out or lift up his voice,” who will “not grow faint or be crushed.”

When Christians hear the prophet’s description of a humble servant who comes to bring God’s justice, we recognize a picture of Jesus. Especially on this day, with the Gospel of Matthew in our ears, Isaiah’s description of the servant “whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights” makes us think of Jesus’s baptism, and the astounding voice from the heavens, breaking through the clouds to declare that Jesus is God’s Son, whom God loves, with whom God is well pleased. But this “servant song” is not just a picture of Jesus. Isaiah 42 is a pattern for God’s people.

Seven-hundred-something years before Jesus's advent, when the prophet Isaiah first delivered these words from God to the exiled people of Israel, the people needed hope and promise and direction and renewal *now*, not just in a distant future, not just for generations they would not live to see. They were defeated, separated by force from their homeland and from the center of their spiritual life. They needed to see the strands that joined them together with the generations of faithful servants who came before them. They needed to see themselves in the work that God was still knitting, even through hardship and harm's way, to bring justice and righteousness to the whole world. They needed to hear the prophet's call to live faithfully in pattern, because God intended to keep working through them.

From generation to generation. To Jesus, and even to us.

Over and over again Matthew's Gospel points out the pattern that knits the life of Jesus together with the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. Matthew expects his readers to be familiar with the exodus and the exile, with the Promised Land and the prophets' proclamations. With Jesus's baptism, Matthew's audience is *supposed* to have this epiphany: that Jesus, standing in the river with John the Baptizer, is the servant described by Isaiah, the beloved one whom God upholds. Jesus's conception, his birth, his baptism, his ministry, and his suffering all bear out the messages of Isaiah and the other Old Testament prophets.

Yes, Jesus lived and served and suffered in ways that were completely unique, but he also lived and served and suffered in ways that were completely "in pattern." He did not come out of nowhere. Jesus's way was God's way, and God's way is the way of God's people, all God's faithful servants taking up the pattern, from generation to generation.

Listen again to the words of Isaiah; can you hear the pattern?

"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. He will not cry out or lift up his voice... he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth..."

Thus says God, the Lord,

"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, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” (Is 42:1-2a, 3b, 4, 5a, 6-9)

When knitters “read their work,” we recognize knit stitches and purl stitches so we can pick up yarn and needles and add to the work that has already begun. When we “read this work” of Isaiah’s “servant song” we can see the pattern established, the “former things” that make way for God’s ongoing work of delight, of justice, of restoration. We can recognize the pattern in the lives of faithful servants like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Noah and Moses and Joshua and Samuel and David. We can recognize faithful prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We can recognize faithful women, like Deborah and Esther, Ruth and Rahab. We can recognize Jesus himself, the Beloved Son, and we can recognize those who faithfully joined the pattern through Jesus’s ministry: the fishermen who became disciples, the women who served and followed and led, the zealous persecutor who became the zealous apostle, all the visionaries and the letter-writers and the very first church folks.

God was working this pattern from the beginning, and is working it, still, even in and through us. When we listen to the prophet’s words we recognize Jesus and all God’s faithful servants—and when we look around the table, around this table and every table where we gather, we recognize all the faithful people who are taking up the work today. We listen and look and we see where we came from, see the pattern that was set in place long before us; the pattern we are reading, learning, practicing, knitting together, one fumbling stitch at a time.