

Isaiah 42:1-9 Baptism and Service
Matthew 3:13-17
January 12, 2020

It is the time of the year to focus on the gospels, and that means the telling and re-telling of the story of the life of Jesus, whose birth we have just celebrated. It is called Epiphany, which in general refers to the appearance of the incarnated Christ.

Of course, the gospel accounts of Jesus' life can be told throughout the year, as well as the accounts of the origins of the church, found in Acts and the Epistles, or the story of Israel that we find in the Hebrew Bible that we call the Old Testament.

But from now until Holy Week in April, the focus is on the *earthly life* of Jesus, particularly the ministry and message of Jesus near the end, when he came preaching and teaching in Galilee, and feeding and healing, casting out demons and raising the dead. All of this is to say, that Jesus not only came to die for the forgiveness of Sin, but to live a life of love. The two are related.

The Baptism

In Matthew's gospel it begins with the Baptism in the Jordan River by the relative of Jesus known as John the Baptist. There was some tension about this both for the early Christians, and between Jesus and John himself. John was uncomfortable with the arrangement because he saw himself as subordinate

to Jesus, and in the general logic of things, one would expect, as John did, the superior to baptize the subordinate, not the other way around. Even for the early Christians, who had in their midst some of John the Baptist's disciples, this arrangement was a concern because it implied the superiority of John.

So after John objected, Jesus insisted by saying, "Let it be so now, it is proper for us to do this *to fulfill all righteousness.*" In this baptism we learn an important lesson about the kind of lives we are to lead. Here we have an example of the biblical value of deference, on the part of the superior, a very difficult example to follow.

Servant

One of the great prophetic images from the Book of Isaiah is that of the Suffering Servant, which also turns out to be associated with Jesus. In the text from Isaiah that has been read today, we see the first reference to this servant:

"I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations."

We are told that he will be gentle;

"He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

And we are told that he will be faithful;

“he will not falter or be discouraged until he establishes justice on earth.”

And to what end? These words refer to the Servant:

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness. I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you:

To be a covenant for the people, and a light for the Gentiles.

To open the eyes of the blind

to free captives from prison

And to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.”

It is a grand vision of a person who is somehow not caught up in the pursuits common to humanity and thus not diminished by its corruptions. I should say that there are no Jewish groups or scholars who see in this description a foretelling of Jesus, yet all across the domain of Christ that connection has been made.

There are four Suffering Servant passages in The Book of Isaiah, this one is the first. It is lesser known than the last, found in chapter 53, which is filled with more familiar images:

“He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
Surely *he* took up *our* pain
and bore *our* suffering, yet we considered him
punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for *our* transgressions,
he was crushed for *our* iniquities;
the punishment that brought *us* peace was on *him*,
and by *his* wounds *we* are healed.”

It is this Suffering Servant who is baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan River, and it is this example that is also consistent with Paul’s hymn in the 2nd chapter of Philippians that could very easily have been one of our texts for the day:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!”

Paul says we should look not only to our own needs, but also to the needs of others, counting them as equals.

We can even find the same idea in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus teaches his disciples about *his* way of being the superior in a relationship:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

He said, “the last will be first, and the first will be last.”

Justice, Righteousness, and Service

We know that all is not right with the world. All is not even right among us, and in our own lives, even if we don't like to admit it. And, even if we don't like to admit it, this prophetic dream of justice and peace is *our* dream too. Yet we are caught up in this contradiction; we think that the only way for things to be right in the world is for the people who are right *get their way*, when the prophetic vision, the example of Jesus, and the biblical message all agree that the only real chance is when those who are right die for others, which means die to themselves.

Getting one's way is not all that it is cracked up to be. We know that we are not here just to assure our eternal destiny, but like Jesus, to live a life of love, changing the world as we have the opportunity.

And before I finish, let me speak about the ministries of our church. As feeble they may be, these activities are meant not only to help others, but to teach us this servanthood lesson.

We give to World Missions and Home Missions, to the One Great Hour of Sharing and the Retired Ministers and Missionaries; We support Andrews House and People in Need, the Common Ground Free Store, Family Promise, and Turning Point; we collect bread from Panera's, and as well offer Bible Study and Prayer and Worship ministries, all to give opportunity for service.

We do this so that it will become a lifestyle, so that our youth can learn the value of service, and we too, and because we know, that the dream envisioned in Isaiah's Suffering Servant and embodied in the baptism of Jesus, and seen in the great Christ hymn in Philippians 2, is a true dream that will come true, does come true in countless ways, and when it does, the world is changed. And in the world we await those who won't serve have no place, while by the miracle of grace, the servants are the leading citizens, they are comforted and satisfied, and all righteousness is fulfilled.

May God add a blessing to the hearing and speaking of these words from scripture. Amen.

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