

First Sunday after the Epiphany - The Baptism of Our Lord

January 12, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 42:1-7 “Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
2 He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
3 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
4 he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
5 This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
6 “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
7 to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

“God’s Willing Servant”

Eyes straight ahead, standing at attention, no expression on his face. He does his best not to draw attention to himself, just perform his duties. Next to the butler stands a fellow servant dressed almost exactly the same, penguin-like in black tuxedos and white gloves. But when they depart the presence of lords and ladies, that’s when the differences between the two servants becomes obvious. Thomas grumbles and complains. His uniform is too uncomfortable. He resents having to address everyone with proper titles and silly expressions of formality. He is happy to have a place to sleep and food to eat. But he feels the whole thing very demeaning. Carson, on the other hand, relishes every opportunity to be in the presence of the great family he serves. Bestowed with a dignity he feels undeserving, he is proud to be brought into the presence of prestige. Carrying out his responsibilities is a joy and an honor he does not take lightly.

If you have no stomach for stuffy period dramas or PBS productions filled with British accents, you get an immediate image in your mind when you hear about servants. It can be negative: Resentment and anger from someone forced to perform unwanted tasks. Or positive: joy and eager dedication to carry out serious responsibilities. When Jesus trudges through the muddy banks of the Jordan River to greet John the Baptizer, which picture best fits him in your mind? Isaiah's prophecy in chapter forty-two shows us God's willing Servant. Jesus is serving you. His greatest joy is what he can do for you.

Isaiah introduces us to a picture of Jesus in chapter 42 as God himself sees him: **"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight."** (Isaiah 42:1) Jesus comes to perform his duty. But does that make him like a grumpy convenience store employee, perturbed that his peace has been interrupted when your Coke Zero needs to pass through the laser scanner? Is Servant Jesus wearing a serious look on his face, like the President's Secret Service detail, determined to do what needs to be done, but not particularly excited about it? Or is Servant Jesus more like the fresh faced smile behind the cheerful "welcome to Chick-Fil-A" as soon as you pass through restaurant's doors?

The way we view Jesus as Servant reveals more about us than it does about God. More about how we view our relationship to God's will than it does about how God actually operates. Our world has taught us customer is king. The customer is always right. It's natural for those feelings to bleed into our spiritual lives as well. Research was performed recently revealing that Christian churches in America are losing young adults by the boat load. Maybe that's not surprising. But the reasons behind that mini-exodus might be. One of the root causes, the authors uncover, is a generation of church consumers. They think church is all about serving them. Church became dispensable when they no longer were getting what they wanted. Through the actions of many of our church leaders, they are hearing that the church is all about them, that the church is there to serve them, and that the church is the place for all their needs and desires to be met. (Rainer, p. 155)

The portrait of Servant Jesus in Isaiah 42 is different. He comes to serve. But not by any marketing strategy we are familiar with. No pop up ads. No fast-talking hyped up salesmen. Isaiah 42:2 tells us: **"He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets."** Jesus is not boisterous, not an obnoxious showman. He simply goes about his task with determination. Isaiah tells us: **"In faithfulness he will bring forth justice."** (Isaiah 42:3)

Maybe our image of Jesus is warped by something deeper inside us. How much does fear dominate our relationship with God? Fear of the mess we've made of our lives? So we stay away from God. A young woman told her pastor she wouldn't be coming to church because she spent the night with her ex-boyfriend. On one hand, that's healthier than our society's attitude toward sin. Most would just do whatever they want and get angry or defensive if anyone questions their life choices. Guilt can be a positive thing when we are bothered by disobeying God or offending his holiness. But when we stay away from the only remedy, we - the sinners - are the only ones that lose.

I was once in a group of pastors where one colleague revealed his greatest fear was being discovered for a fraud. That people look up to him and expect him to have everything figured out and have his personal life and family relationships completely in sync with all of God's expectations for church leaders. He was afraid he couldn't be honest about the actual struggles he was suffering through. And without admitting his faults and confessing his weaknesses, there could be no way of getting help.

This might be the way other people see us, but not Servant Jesus. Jesus comes on the scene for weak and broken sinners. Isaiah tells us: **"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."** (Isaiah 42:3) If that is you, if you are the **"bruised reed,"** Isaiah promises God's Servant won't snap you off in anger. (Isaiah 42:3) If that is you, if you are the wick with almost nothing left, Isaiah says God's servant will not snuff you out. Isaiah shows us the determination of God's promised Messiah. It is not easy. It is not simple. There is no easy button. There is no voice command for Alexa to do it for him. No shortcut for Siri to automate the process. Nothing will stand in the way of God's Servant carrying out the Lord's mission to rescue humanity. **"He will not grow falter or be discouraged."** (Isaiah 42:4) The difficult task will require all his attention and energy. But he won't give up or go to pieces.

Jesus reveals this difficult mission to Jon the Baptizer in Matthew chapter 3. Jesus didn't need baptism in the way the rest of the world needs baptism. He didn't have any sins that needed to be forgiven. Jesus had no wrongs to confess and turn away from. At his Baptism, Servant Jesus comes to identify with sinners. Jesus isn't concerned with running them off and scaring them away. Jesus even tells us exactly why he is doing what he's doing in Matthew 3:15 **"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."** In Isaiah 42:6 God promises his Servant: **"I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand."** In righteousness Jesus would carry out every command God gave to all human beings. Jesus would do it without wavering to the exact specifications required in God's Law. But in righteousness Jesus would also suffer. Jesus would take the place of fearful sinners under God's holy demands. Jesus would stand as victim under God's righteous justice requiring payment for sin. Yet Isaiah shows us Jesus wasn't a weak and powerless victim when he suffered for us.

Jesus shows himself to be a willing and eager servant at his Baptism. Even if we see the determined look and steely gaze in his eyes. He does it with joy. Hebrews 12:2 gives us this image of Jesus: **"For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."** Jesus isn't a fearful servant. Jesus isn't the servant who is reluctant and annoyed that he has to be bothered. Jesus is the quarterback leading his team out of the tunnel onto the field for the Super Bowl. He is pumping up everyone around him. He is high-fiving the fans. He is raring to go.

By his service, Jesus brings power into the lives of God's people. Jesus brings a different kind of covenant than the one that had been in effect even before the time of the Prophet Isaiah. Jesus came to bring a new relationship between God and his people: **"I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles."** (Isaiah 42:6) The old covenant demanded God's people hold up their end of the

bargain so God could bless them. Throughout Israel's history, God's people showed how absolutely incapable they were of doing what God required. So God had to come up with a covenant that didn't depend on faithfulness of flawed, sinful people. Hebrews 9:15 tells us: **"For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant."** Jesus will come to be this covenant.

God's Servant will keep going, keep pushing on with determination until **"he establishes justice on earth."** (Isaiah 42:4) This justice is parallel to what Jesus brings for all people: **"In his teaching the islands will put their hope."** (Isaiah 42:4) Here is an example of where the newer NIV improves on the older NIV. The word "Torah" translated here "teaching" often means law in the Old Testament. But its basic meaning is just instruction. Far-flung people don't put their hope in laws or commands, what they might do or hope to obey. No, people scattered across the seas put their hope in the teaching of good news, the gospel of what God's Servant has accomplished for them.

Martin Luther describes the results of the joyful service of Jesus: "Is not this a beautiful, glorious exchange, by which Christ, who is wholly innocent and holy, not only takes upon himself another's sin, that is, my sin and guilt, but also clothes and adorns me, who am nothing but sin, with his own innocence and purity?"¹ No longer required to do what can't be done by sinful souls, God's people are free to live for God. The blindness of unbelief has fallen. The shackles of shame are gone. God's people are now free to serve their Savior gladly, willingly, eagerly.

Jesus now partners with people like you and me. Jesus brought the good news of his righteousness to your heart. Now Jesus works through his servants to share his good news: **"he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope."** (Isaiah 42:4) This gives God's people a different focus for our lives. Those authors who uncovered the dangers of a consumer mentality in the church also offered a solution. Churches that are outwardly focused are sending the message that church isn't just about me. It's also about how I can glorify God as I meet the needs of others. Looking outward reinforces our need for worship and spiritual growth and shows all the God's people how important they are to the life of the church. (Rainer, p. 155)

You don't have to wear a tuxedo and white gloves. You don't need to put on a uniform with your name tag. You just get to put on your Baptism. In Baptism God comes to you. In Baptism sinners offer God all their lame excuses and failed attempts at service. In Baptism God comes to gift a sinful soul with a new identity. Washed and cleansed, the baptized believer stand holy and innocent before God. Purified of stain and stench, God's holy people have a new purpose in life. Jesus came willingly to fulfill all righteousness. You have the privilege of celebrating that righteousness by serving your Savior. What Jesus started at the Jordan is your privilege to share with our world of sinners. Amen.

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 51: Sermons I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 51, p. 316). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.