

Isaiah 42:1-9

- 1 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.
- 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
- 3 a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
- 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
- 5 Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
- 6 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,
- 7 to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
- 8 I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
- 9 See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Matt. 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

A SAVIOR IS NEEDED

In the Bible we learn that God's people were always getting into hot water. They always needed a leader, a Messiah sent from God to save them.

This was especially true when the prophet Isaiah preached.

God's people had been exiled to the ancient kingdom of Babylon. They had been there many years. Back home their temple was destroyed. Their country was in ruins.

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah proclaim a word of judgment. God's people were unfaithful, and that's why God allowed them to be defeated.

But, now the time of punishment is over. The prayers of God's people have been answered. Now is the time of deliverance.

God is going to give his people what they desperately need, a new Messiah. This servant sent from God is going to do for Israel what she cannot do for herself.

SURPRISING MESSIAH

So, what kind of person will this servant be?

Will he be a warrior king who will come charging in on a white horse? Will he be a great orator who will influence his people with powerful, fiery speech?

Not exactly.

No, this servant who is charged to bring justice not only to Israel but also to the whole world is described in a very modest way. According to Isaiah, this servant will not lift up his voice. In fact he will be so gentle that he won't even quench a flickering candle. (Isaiah 42:2-3)

What kind of Messiah is this?

How can anyone bring about justice by being soft-spoken and non-violent?

In my experience the Babylons of this world do not let the meek inherit the earth. The Babylons of this world respond to only one thing, the point of a sword.

Justice requires military might, political skill, and powerful rhetoric. If you're going to make an omelet, you have to crack a few eggs. The world is a dangerous and difficult place. If God is going to send a Savior he better send us someone who is up to the job.

The person described by Isaiah doesn't sound like a Messiah to me. He sounds weak and ineffective.

And yet the Scripture tells us that this meek and mild Messiah will be up to the task. He will bring justice to the world. He will bring the light of God's truth to all the nations.

Once again we learn the lesson. God's ways are not our ways. The Messiah God sends is not the Messiah we thought we needed.

When people think of God they think of the One who is omnipotent. God is the One who can do whatever God wants to do. God is not limited in any way.

On the other hand we are just the opposite. Human beings are weak, limited and vulnerable.

Not so with God.

POWER REVEALED IN WEAKNESS

But, the Bible teaches us the seemingly contradictory truth that the power of God is revealed in weakness. God's message is not proclaimed best by the strong and powerful. God's message is proclaimed best by the meek and lowly.

Paul told the proud and boastful Corinthians that God chose the weak to preach the gospel. In this way it became evident that the power was not in the messenger but in the message. (1 Corinthians 1:18-34)

Those called to serve in God's kingdom don't do it out of a position of strength but out of a position of humility and service.

And the ultimate example of that, of course is Jesus.

In today's lesson from Matthew we get our first glimpse of Jesus. Christians believe that he is the Savior referred to in Isaiah's prophecy.

You probably heard echoes of that prophecy in Matthew's account. The Spirit of the Lord descends upon Jesus. He is the one with whom God is well pleased.

But, this is also a humbling experience as well.

WHY BAPTIZE JESUS?

How does Jesus kick off his ministry of salvation for the world? He kneels before John Baptist out in the wilderness and asks to be baptized in the muddy Jordan River.

Is this any way for a Messiah to act?

John is not so sure. Baptism for John was a way to wash away sins and get ready for the kingdom that was about to come.

John was like that guy who put up the giant billboard on the Turnpike. Have you seen it? It says that Jesus is coming back May 21, 2011. Sorry about those of you who had something planned for June this year!

John didn't know the exact date, but he did say the Messiah was coming soon. And this Messiah would mean business. This Messiah would be ready to separate the wheat from the chaff and cut down those who weren't righteous.

Time is up. Get ready. Repent and be baptized right now.

That was John's message. But, the Messiah comes to John, and what does he do? He asks to be baptized.

That didn't fit with John's idea of what it meant to be a Messiah. Instead of cutting down sinful people Jesus in being baptized with them. He identifies with them. What's going on here?

John said,

"I don't get it. You don't need to be baptized by me. I need to be baptized by you. You're the holy one. I'm the sinful one."

POWER AND WEAKNESS

John had the same problem most of us have. We think God always works through power.

But, suppose that's not true. Suppose God is not like the President only a hundred times more powerful.

Suppose God is like Jesus, a humble suffering servant who gets down in the mud and muck with His people. Suppose God comes to save us from our sins instead of condemning us.

John found this hard to believe.

The early church found this hard to believe. They didn't understand why John baptized Jesus. It didn't fit with their concept of baptism. In all of the gospels there is this ambivalence about the relationship between Jesus and John and the baptism.

But, the sinless one was baptized for us. The sinless one identifies with us and takes on our sins as a way of saving us.

A PICTURE OF GOD

Christians believe that when we look at Jesus standing knee deep in the Jordan we see as much of God as we can ever hope to see.

In Jesus we see one who wins the victory through suffering. In Jesus we see a God who blesses and prays for the very ones who persecute him.

We see the power of a servant who does not raise his voice or his hand against his enemies. This is the human face of God.

This is the Son with whom God is well pleased. When we look at Jesus we get a glimpse of heaven and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. (Matthew 3:16-17)

PERSISTANCE AND HOPE

It's important to note that though the Messiah is amazingly human and soft-spoken, the Messiah is also persistent.

In Isaiah we read that God's servant will bend but not break. He will not lose heart in the face of danger or be crushed by the tyrants that seek to do him harm. (Isaiah 42:3-4)

Many times in the gospels we read that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. In other words he was determined to bring God's message and do God's will despite the consequences.

Despite warnings from friend and foe alike Jesus would not be discouraged or tempted. He would not give in to despair, even though he was well aware of the cross that he must bear.

What gave Jesus the strength to carry on and go on? What gave Jesus hope? I think it was this vision from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus literally opened the eyes of the blind, made the deaf to hear and the lame to walk. Even the dead were raised.

But, all of these miracles pointed to a greater promise, a time when the gospel would spread to the nations, the whole world. The truth of God would bring light to a dark world. Prisoners to the old way of life would be set free to live in the warm glow of grace and forgiveness.

The prophet Isaiah predicted what would happen. God was going to do something new. And in Jesus that prediction came true. That gave Jesus the strength to faithfully serve.

HIS BAPTISM AND OURS

So, what does all mean to us? Does the baptism of Jesus have anything to do with our baptism?

At first blush we might want to react like John and say there is no connection. Jesus was God's Son and we're not. The heavens opened up when Jesus was baptized. I'm guessing that didn't happen when you were baptized.

But, though there are big differences between the baptism of Jesus and ours, there are also some things that those two baptisms have in common.

For example, in Jesus' baptism and ours we are named.

Jesus was called God's beloved son. We are named in the same way. Whenever I baptize a child, I ask,

"What is the child's name?"

The child is then given his or her Christian name. The moment of naming is holy, for in a sense it reminds us that none of us have a name until God tells us who we are.

Just as the voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus to be the beloved Son, so in baptism the church says on God's behalf,

"You are someone who has been named by God."

Life is not just one big accident. It is a part of God's plan. We are a part of God's plan.

We have been adopted into the holy family.

EPIPHANY

This past week the church celebrated the Epiphany. Epiphany means “a divine manifestation, the sudden realization of meaning of something large and important.”

All our life we have little epiphanies. We understand in a deeper way that God has called us by name.

We might be soft-spoken. We might seem weak in many ways. But, that doesn't matter. What matters is that we are called by God, a God who gets down in cold, muddy waters of the Jordan with sinful people like you and me.

And when he does things change. The call to service becomes clear.

JILL

A middle-aged woman named Jill was trying to decide what she ought to do with her life. She thought about going to seminary and becoming a priest in the Episcopal Church.

To help her decide, the committee on preparation for ministry suggested that she work for a time as an intern in a hospital chaplain's office.

One day a distraught and exhausted looking man approached Jill in the corridor. He said,

“I don't know what I'm asking for, but your name tag says Chaplain. We're not church people. But, my father seems to need to talk to someone before he can die. Something's holding him back. Please come and see what you can do for him.”

Jill began to panic. She was not a priest. What could she do?

She was led to a darkened room where a pale, emaciated figure lay upon the hospital bed. She touched his shoulder gently. He acknowledged her presence with a flutter of the eyelids.

She asked if he wanted to have a prayer with her. There was another flutter of the eyelids. She mumbled through something. But, when she finished, he still seemed to be holding on to something, there was something wrong.

She thought that she might bless him and then she remembered,

“No, wait. I’m not yet a priest. I’m not ordained.”

But, as she looked at this frail, tortured figure her memory was stirred. She remembered putting her three small children to bed at night, saying a blessing and then signing them with the cross.

She thought, “I can do that. Mothers do that.”

So, she did that, gave the old man a gentle kiss, and left the room. Later the son found her and said, “Thank you. He’s gone. I don’t know what you did, but thank you.”

Without thinking Jill said, “I gave him permission to cross the street.”

In that moment Jill had an epiphany.

She already had a call to minister in Christ’s name. Mothers and fathers know how to bless and how to absolve. Jill decided not to go to seminary.

She had been called to serve right where she was.

A BAPTISM OF HOPE

All of us who are baptized have been called to serve in the name of Jesus. Our call to service does not have to be dramatic. We just have to be willing to get down into the cold, muddy water of life and trust that God is present.

William Willimon tells of what happened to a group that he took to the New Orleans area after the onslaught of hurricane Katrina. He said that the little town in Louisiana was almost wiped off the map, but the churches in his area were committed to rebuilding it.

The task seemed overwhelming. One person said,
“We’re only church people. It’s not like we’re the government or something.”

The government did respond. There were dozens of trailers on the outskirts of town to house the people. But, the government came and left. The church people kept coming.

Three years after the disaster the church people and the community gathered for a Thanksgiving service. The speaker from the town talked about how long after the government left these church people had kept coming. Weekend after weekend they came. They stood with these people in their time of need. They made friends.

The speaker said,

“The government brought us some financial aid, and that was fine. But, the church people, the Christians who came brought us hope. It was the hope that enabled us to survive.”

We are in the business of bringing hope to the world. That is the meaning of our baptism. We, like Jesus get down in the cold, muddy waters with sinful people just like us.

But, we do not lose hope.

We have seen a vision of a greater salvation. We have seen the heavens open and the heavenly dove descend.

That one epiphany changes everything.

Amen.