

**A Bruised Reed**

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Isaiah 42:1-9

- 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.

## Matthew 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."

## MANGER AND SWADDLING CLOTHES

I was fascinated by the last devotional in our Advent book. The author talked about the manger, the feeding trough in which Jesus was laid.

She said that in Roman times unwanted babies were often placed in a manger and left.

A baby born in a manger was not wanted and perhaps doomed to die in infancy.

On the other hand, the fact that Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes meant that he was loved and wanted.

Odd.

How could this child be loved and rejected?

How can this child be heralded by the angels and yet born in a barn?

The angels told the shepherds that this strange situation was a sign.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth give us a clue about his life.

The Messiah will not be the Messiah they had been expecting.

And these contradictions will continue throughout the ministry of Jesus.

He will be loved and rejected.

He will be powerful and yet weak.

This was not the Messiah the people expected.  
And maybe this is not the Messiah we expected either.

## A BRUISED REED

And yet, when we look at our lesson from Isaiah, the description of God's chosen servant  
... the one upon whom God's favor rests ...  
He sounds a lot like Jesus.

God's Spirit is upon him.  
God is with Him.  
And yet, this Servant of the Lord shows signs of weakness as well as strength.

He will bring justice to the nations.  
But, he won't do it with loud and divisive speech.

He will not "cry or lift up his voice."  
He will not lead anti-establishment demonstrations in the street.

His way will be the way of quiet compassion.  
This Servant will be like a "bruised reed."

A reed was often used in the ancient world as a measuring tool.  
If a reed was broken it would be difficult if not impossible to use it for that purpose.

When life gets difficult, we are like a broken reed.  
We cannot measure things. We lose our sense of perspective.

We have a hard time knowing what to do or where to go. We can lose our center in life.

Like us the Servant Savior will be one of the broken ones.

He will be bruised by life, but unlike us he will be able to keep it together.  
Instead of succumbing to sin he will overcome sin for all of us.

His message to the world's rejected will come from the bottom up instead of the top down.

He will suffer.

He will know failure.

And yet, despite all that will happen to him, he will not break.

This bruised reed will be the measuring stick.

He will show us what it means to retain our humanity in a "dog eat dog world".

### A DIMLY BURNING WICK

Most commentators agreed that this portion of Isaiah was written during the Babylonian Captivity. God's people had been taken prisoner and had been resettled in Babylon.

You'll remember that toward the end of those days in captivity the people had just about given up hope of ever returning.

Their children had learned to speak the language of the oppressor.

And most of the others had decided to just settle down and make the best of things in a foreign land.

The hope of the Promised Land seemed like a dimly burning flame.

They were a people on the verge of extinction.

There will be times when everything will go wrong with our lives.

We will be held captive by forces that are beyond our control.

We may even feel like we are on the verge of extinction.

And it's at this time that this promise from Isaiah comes to life.

There's a Servant Savior coming.

And this Savior understands our situation.

The Messiah will be like us, a fragile dimly burning wick.

And yet this fragile light will not be extinguished by the deluge of the worldly powers.

Despite the forces arrayed against him, this Servant Savior will not “grow faint” or “be crushed.”

He will focus like a laser on his mission.

And his mission will be to bring justice to the world.  
He comes to make things right in a world that is all wrong.

He will come to make things right in our world.

Despite all odds, his teachings will be known from coast to coast.  
And when all the great empires of the world have fallen, his life will still stand.

How can this be?  
How can such a vulnerable servant be so powerful?

This is how the God who made heaven and earth has chosen to bring his message to the people.

This is how God will take the people by the hand and lead them to a place of righteousness.

This is how the blind world will come to see the glory of God. This is how those who sit in a great darkness will come to see the light.

This is how the prisoners will be freed.

God chooses to come in the one who is born in a stable.

God chooses to come in the one who is a bruised reed.

God chooses to come in the one who is a dimly burning wick.

## HUMILITY IN A PROUD WORLD

But, you may ask, why?

Why does God come in such an unexpected way?

How you do something says a whole lot about who you are. Our methods reveal character.

And God's character is revealed in the ministry of the Servant Savior. God's love and glory comes in a form that seems weak and lowly. God identifies not with the strong and powerful but with those who feel abandoned and alone.

And if this is God's method of saving the world ... if God chooses to come to us in the humble and broken man named Jesus ...  
... what does it teach us about how we should do things?

Well, maybe it means that we should adopt the lifestyle of this Servant Savior.

Maybe we should come to the world with vulnerability and humility ...  
... not with pride and loud claims to power.

This still sounds very strange to our ears.

This appears to be a dangerous path.  
Some would say that this is not how the "world works."  
Some would say that we are being unrealistic.

Quite often the humble are trampled by the proud and the powerful.

But, according to Isaiah, the glory of this world is false.  
The world's claim of ultimate authority is idolatry.

The power of the proud world is an illusion.

And we are called to resist, not by adopting the methods of the Empire, but by adopting the methods of the Kingdom of God.

We can't do this on our own.

But, we can do this through the Spirit empowered ministry of Jesus.

In the ministry of the Servant Savior, we are given the assurance the God who created heaven and earth is in on the side of the bruised reeds of the world.

Bruised reeds. That's who we are.

And the God who made heaven and earth is with us and for us.

God does not come to add to the world's condemnation.

God comes to save us from the world's condemnation.

And we preach that message not only by what we say but also and especially by what we do.

## JESUS IS OUR MODEL

A key passage in the New Testament makes it plain. We are all called to pattern our lives after the life of the Servant Savior.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians we read that our attitude should be modeled after Jesus' attitude.

Specifically Jesus lowered himself so that we might be raised. He "emptied himself" of heavenly power in order to become a part of our world.

He took the form of a Servant so that we might be free.

He gave his life away ... even to the point of dying on the cross. (See Philippians 2:5-11)

Jesus did not save the world by keeping the world at arm's length.

Jesus saved the world by becoming a part of the world with all its pain and danger.

He even took up a cross.

And he invited his disciples to also take up a cross and follow him.

He invited his disciples to lead not by emphasizing their strengths but by being attentive to the broken parts of their life.

The best leader in the church is not always the strongest.  
Sometimes the best leader is the bruised reed.

The best leader in the church is not always the one whose flame burns the brightest.  
Sometimes the best leader is the dimly flickering flame.

The best leader in the church is not always the one who boldly shouts the loudest.  
Sometimes the best leader is the one who quietly listens to the cries of those who suffer.

In the church our methods must reflect what we believe.

Our attitudes must mirror the attitudes of our Savior ...  
Like our Savior we are called to be servants. We are called to be a bruised reed that does not break ... a dimly burning wick that is not quenched.

## JESUS' BAPTISM

This Sunday we celebrate the baptism of the Lord.

I'll admit that the baptism of Jesus has always presented a problem for me.  
Here's why:

Baptism was a ritual meant to wash away sins.

But, in the Bible we read that though Jesus was tempted, he did not sin.  
(Hebrews 4:15)

The sinless Jesus did not need to be baptized.  
But, he was.

Why?

What is the meaning of the baptism of Jesus?

In our lesson from Matthew, John the Baptist asks the same question.  
Why do you want me to baptize you Jesus?  
It should be the other way around.

Again we have a contrast.

The Son of God wants to humble himself and be baptized with sinners.

Why should John baptize Jesus?

Jesus answers that question.

Jesus says that he needs to be baptized in order to “fulfill all righteousness.”

“Fulfill all righteousness” means to align one’s will with the will of God. God wants this to happen.

And so John does it.

I imagine that John is uncertain and uncomfortable as he baptizes the Divine in the river.

This is NOT what John envisioned when he predicted the coming of the Messiah.

Like the loved child that is born in the manger, the place of abandonment, ... the sinless One is baptized with sinners in the Jordan River.

Odd.

What can it mean?

We don’t have to wait long for an answer.

It is a sign.

After the baptism of Jesus, all heaven breaks loose.

The Spirit of God descends upon Jesus like a dove.

And a voice from heaven says,

“This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The baptism of Jesus was not a mistake.

This baptism of Jesus reflects the will of God.

In fact, the heart of God is revealed in this baptism.

God comes to seek and save sinners ... people like you and me.

Indeed Jesus’ baptism represents his whole ministry.

He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world ...

... by becoming a part of the world.

John Boulton wrote,

"Imagine the Jordan River ...

a line of unwashed sinners on one side, waiting anxiously for baptism,  
and a line of those newly washed clean on the other.

And now comes God the Son, Jesus of Nazareth ...

the only one among them all who might truly claim to be clean and pure ...

And he proceeds to get in line with the sinners...

He crosses the Jordan, so to speak, in the opposite direction:

from 'clean' to 'sinner,' from insider to outsider

...he confirms his solidarity with sinners by submitting to baptism ..."

That passage I quoted from Hebrews (4:15) tells us Jesus was tempted  
and yet did not sin.

But, that verse tells us something else that is also very important.

This sinless one who is baptized along with sinners also understands us.

He is the Great High Priest who makes atonement for our sins ...

... but He also understands what it is like to be human and struggle.

In Hebrews 4:15-16 we learn that this human Priest who comes from the  
throne of Heaven is able to "sympathize with our weaknesses."

And so we come to the throne of grace with confidence

... knowing that we will find mercy in our time of need.

God in Christ tells us that we are understood.

God in Christ tells us that the Divine is with us and for us.

God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Are you are bruised reed?

Are you broken by life?

Is your dimly flickering flame about to go out?

There is One who stands with us in our hour of need.

He understands.

He forgives.

He washes our sins away as we are baptized with Him in the waters.

And then He invites us to stand on the other side of the Jordan.

### THE POWER OF A NAME

We watch as the heavens open.

The Holy Spirit comes upon us like a dove.

And a voice from heaven tells us what we long to hear,

“This is my beloved Son.

This is my beloved daughter.

With you I am well pleased.”

When you are a child of the King, life takes on new meaning and hope.

Some of you may remember the abduction of Elizabeth Smart. This little girl was taken from her home and abused in terrible ways.

But, though her story was national news, no one could find her.

As it turns out she was hiding in plain sight.

She was never far from home, but her abductor told her that if she ever told anyone her true name, he would kill her and her family.

She believed the demonic lie.

She was not far from home but she could not go home. She could not claim her own name.

Eventually she was recognized by someone, and once her identity was known, she was freed.

It seems to me that the baptism of Jesus teaches us the same lesson.

Once we know the truth about our identity, the world can no longer control us with threats and lies.

We know the truth and that truth does indeed set us free. So let me say it again. We all need to hear this good news.

You are God's daughter.

You are God's son.

In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.

It's time for those bruised by life to come home.

Amen.