

“A Light to the Nations”

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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Baptism of the Lord

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” So begins the 42nd chapter in the book of Isaiah. *God* is the one who is speaking. Here is *God’s* servant, whom *God* upholds; *God’s* chosen, in whom *God’s* soul delights. It is the first line of a prophecy, a prophecy that dates back to the 8th century BC, a prophecy about a special *servant* of God, chosen *by* God. “I have put my spirit upon him,” continues God; “he will bring forth justice to the nations.”

Now it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that the prophecy is referring to Jesus. It is one of several similar prophecies in the book of Isaiah, prophecies about a certain *servant* of God, a servant called to fulfill a particular role, a servant who ends up suffering a great deal at the hands of his enemies. Collectively, these prophecies are known as “the servant songs;” they are poems that may have been set to music. The servant has been called the “suffering servant.” Jews, of course, do not believe these passages are referring to Jesus, but instead, perhaps, to the whole nation of Israel.

The thing is, though, that *God himself* gave us some pretty strong clues how these verses should be interpreted. When Jesus appeared in the wilderness where John the Baptist was proclaiming his message of repentance and baptizing people for the remission of their sins, when Jesus steps down into the water and comes up out of the water, “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.” (Matthew 3:16) There’s a voice, thundering from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17) God’s words echo back to that passage in Isaiah 42: “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” Jesus’ baptism shows us what happens when God says, “I have put my spirit upon him.” God descended upon Jesus; God *put the Spirit in him*. There is no story anywhere else in the Bible – Old or New Testaments – like this one; no one else who is ever told that they are God’s Son, God’s Beloved, the one in whom God delights. No one else is *chosen* the way Jesus was; no one else *serves* God the way Jesus did; no one else *delights* God to the same extent that *Jesus* brought joy to God’s heart.

Only *Jesus* could do the tasks that God was calling him to do; only *Jesus* could right the wrongs that God was calling him to right, only *Jesus* could give his life for the sins of the world.

Matthew’s gospel makes the connection even more explicit. For as Jesus is traveling around

Galilee, bringing hope and healing to many people, Mathew says, “This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah,” and then Matthew quotes the first four verses of Isaiah 42, in their entirety, to prove his point. (Matthew 12:17-21) Matthew wants to make it abundantly clear to his readers: *Jesus* is God’s chosen servant; *Jesus* is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy long ago.

That prophecy gives us some additional insight into what God sent Jesus here to do. “He will bring forth *justice* to the nations.” The prophecy repeats the word “justice” two more times in quick succession: “he will faithfully bring forth *justice*,” God says; “he will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established *justice* in the earth,” says God. Clearly, the bringing about of *justice* is one of the critical jobs that God sent Jesus here to do.

But what, exactly, does that word “justice” mean? There are two different Hebrew words that can be translated as “justice.” One of them, *tzedaqah*, has to do with *righteousness*, with one’s personal right living. The other, *mishpat*, has to do with *judgment*, in the sense of a *verdict* or a *sentence*, like in a legal case; what a *judge* would decree, when he has fairly reviewed the evidence in a particular case. The word that appears three times here in Isaiah 42 is the latter. *Mishpat*. Fair and right *judgment*. The implication is that God sent Jesus, in part, to give everybody what they fairly and justly deserve. Those who are guilty of various crimes will pay fairly for what they have done wrong; those who are falsely accused will be vindicated; those who suffer unfairly at the hands of others will receive recompense. Isaiah gives us some clues as to what this looks like: “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.” In the gospels, all the various healings that Jesus performs are part of this *mishpat* – this fair and right judgment – that God cares about. The implication is clear: the fact that *some* people suffer from terrible diseases and disabilities is *not fair*. Bringing God’s *justice* to the world includes bringing *healing* to the people who suffer from such things. Imagine a world in which diseases and disabilities simply *did not exist!* That was an integral part of Jesus’ ministry: bringing *wholeness* and *health* to large numbers of people ... because it was simply the *right* thing to do. Anyone today who is engaged in a line of work that helps bring healing to people – doctors, nurses, paramedics, physical therapists, the list is long! – all those people are doing something akin to what Jesus himself did; all those people are helping to bring God’s *mishpat*, God’s *justice*, to the world. Similarly, all those people who seek to execute *justice* in the legal realm, right-minded judges and lawyers who care about *fairness*, appropriate sentences for crimes committed, vindication for those who have been falsely accused – they, too, are helping to bring God’s *mishpat*, God’s *justice*, to the world; they, too, are doing something like what Jesus himself did.

But there’s another layer to all this. Look again at that first verse in Isaiah 42: “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.” Those last three words are important: “*to the nations*.” God did not just send Jesus to bring about *mishpat* for the people of Israel. God sent Jesus to bring about *mishpat* for the *whole world*. “The coastlands wait for his teaching,” says God; and *there were no Jews who lived along the coastlands!* That was Gentile country! “I have given you as a covenant to the people,” says God, “a light *to the nations!*” Not just a light *to the Jews*, though Jesus was himself a Jew. Not just a light to the *Israelites*, though Jesus was himself a descendant of Israel. God did not just send Jesus to

bring *mishpat* to *some* people. God sent Jesus to bring *mishpat* to *all* people. To the people of Tyre and Sidon. To the Greeks and the Romans. To the people of Africa – like the Ethiopian eunuch – and the people of India – where the apostle Thomas is believed to have traveled. Eventually, in time, to the people of northern Europe, and far-off Asia, and eventually, fifteen hundred years later, to the people of America. “A light to the nations.” Not just *some* of them. *All* of them!

There’s an organization called the Wycliffe Global Alliance. It’s an alliance of Christian organizations with the common objective of translating the Bible into a wide variety of different languages. It’s named for John Wycliffe, who was the first person to translate the Bible into English, more than two centuries before the King James Bible. According to the Wycliffe Global Alliance, the entire Bible has been translated into 698 different languages. The New Testament has been translated into an additional 1548 languages, and portions of the Bible have been translated into 1138 languages on top of that. That makes a total of 3384 different languages that have at least *some* portions of scripture available to them. Yet that is actually still *less than half* of the 7,353 different languages that are known to exist on this planet. There are still nearly a billion people on this planet who do not have access to any portion of the Bible in their own native language. There is still much work to be done to bring God’s word to the *whole* human race. The coastlands, so to speak, *still* wait for his teaching!

The assumption here, of course, is that this is a message *worth* sharing with the nations. I mean, what’s so *special* about Jesus, or about the gospel, that makes it *worth* sharing with other people? Can you answer that? What *difference* does the gospel of Jesus Christ make in *your* life? Does it offer you ... hope? Does it give you ... peace? Comfort? Knowledge? Insight? Wisdom? Does it help you make *sense* of this world? Does it give you a better sense of *right* and *wrong*? Does it provide you a strong moral code to live by? Does it grant you access to the Spirit of God, and the *power* that the Spirit can bring, to *your* life and the lives of others around you? Does it offer you *forgiveness* for those times when you know you’ve screwed up? Does it enable you to do things that you wouldn’t otherwise do, or think you could do? Does it equip you to be able to offer God’s *mishpat*, God’s *justice*, to the world?

There’s not much point in trying to be a light to the nations if you don’t know how Jesus and the gospel illumine your *own* life. How are you a *better* person, because of what Jesus and the gospel have done for *you*? How are you more *joyful* person, a more *responsible* person, a more *loving* person?

Or ... can you imagine what your life would be like *without* Jesus, *without* the gospel?

In our country, today, about 37% of the population attends worship weekly or almost weekly. That’s a smidge more than 1 out of every 3 people. Where are the other two thirds? Some of them show up less frequently. Others of them show their faces at Easter and Christmas. And the rest ... do they even *know* who Jesus is? What he offers? What he has *done*, what he’s *accomplished*?

How are they going to know? Who is going to *share* the good news with them? Who is going to step up and *be* a light to the nations? That was Jesus’ job, back then, but it’s a job he has passed on to us. What could *you* do, *this year*, to share the gospel with someone who *doesn’t yet know it*?

2020 Rev. Bill Pinches