

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.*

Here is my Servant

When you hear the word “baptism” what comes to mind...? Do you see a baby dressed in white, smiling parents gathered around a font while a minister pours water over the child? Do you think of it as a peaceful event? One filled with joy and excitement as someone is introduced as a child of God, and claimed as part of God’s family? Do you remember the day you stood or knelt felt the water on your head, or watched the water poured over the head of your child as you heard the words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...”

The sacrament of Baptism – no matter where or when, no matter how old the individual, there are elements that are always the same – water, the reading of scripture and prayer; the promises of God and the congregation; the Holy Spirit; the remembering and retelling of our salvation story and who we are called to be. We are claimed and marked by God in our identity as God’s beloved children. We wonder how God will be at work in the life of the one who is baptized – how God will call this person to serve God throughout his or her life, and we imagine what that will look like.

What was Jesus’ baptism like? There was no sanctuary, no font, no minister dressed in a black robe, no congregation – unless some of the Pharisees and Sadducees who were there to hear John preach earlier were still there. Yet, there were familiar elements in Jesus’ baptism. There is the telling of the story, as Jesus tells John why he needs to be baptized. There is the element of water, and there is the voice of God, speaking directly to Jesus, calling him beloved and saying that God is well pleased with him. As Jesus entered the river, as the waters covered his head, did he too consider what kind of ministry God was calling him to, what kind of servant God was calling him to be in the world?

It is possible that in those words, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased” Jesus heard echoes of another passage of scripture. A passage he would have known well. A passage from Isaiah in which the prophet describes the kind of servant God will send to lead God’s people. Our reading from Isaiah today begins with the words, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights;” The passage ends with the words, “See the former things have come to pass, and new things I now

declare before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” Professor at Harvard Divinity School Stephanie A. Paulsell writes, “when Jesus rises up, newly baptized, from the waters of the Jordan, he enters into a ministry saturated with the vision Isaiah bequeathed to him and to us, a vision of leadership guided by mercy and a hunger for justice. Jesus’ whole life was a passionate response to God’s call for this new way of living.”¹

In the 4 Servant Songs from Isaiah that Ted and I will be looking at and preaching on over the next few weeks, a servant of the Lord is either spoken about, is spoken to, or speaks on his own. In today’s reading from Isaiah, God says, “Here is my servant…” What kind of servant was God talking about? The passage appears in the portion of the book of Isaiah called Second Isaiah, written during a time when the Jewish community was living in exile just prior to the capture of the city of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia. Some scholars think the servant is Cyrus who returned the people from exile and allowed the rebuilding of the temple. Others think the author of Isaiah was referring to Israel, which is what happens in Isaiah 49. The author of the Gospel of Matthew makes it clear in 12:17-19 that he believes Jesus is in fact the servant about which Isaiah writes, quoting the beginning of today’s passage almost word for word. When Isaiah 42:1-9, today’s reading, was written, the people felt defeated - they had been overtaken by a foreign power, and were asking some of the eternal questions – where is God in the midst of this? Where is our hope? And God says to them, “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…”

It is not as important for us this day as to the exact identity of *who* the servant is, as to *how* the servant is. In fact, in our reading for today, the question of *who* is never answered. Our answer is not who serves, but how do they serve– what kind of servant did God send to God’s people? What kind of leadership should we expect of one called by God, and then in turn expect of ourselves as we follow that example?

The servant Isaiah describes is not one you might expect when thinking about one who is sent to bring justice to the nations, to set captives free, to open the eyes of the blind. A servant is defined as someone working in the service of another. That may be what we think of when we think of maids and butlers serving lords and ladies in country manor homes in the time of Jane Austin, or those working in service of a king or queen even farther back in time. We do not think today in terms of “servants” but in terms of hired help – our CPA’s, nannies and assistants are not called servants, yet they do work in our service. But the kind of servant God was talking about was different. God was not sending someone to clean the house, deliver party invitations, or care for our children. God was sending a person with the heart of someone who does not put themselves first, but rather puts the one they serve first. “Here is **my** servant,” says the Lord. Here is the person working in my service, working on my behalf. Here is the one speaking for, ministering for me. Reading today’s passage in Isaiah, we get an idea of what kind of person God calls into service to work on God’s behalf. Listen again to verse 3: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” If you are a person in exile, how does this sound to you? If you feel like your wick is burning dimly, like you are the bruised reed, how do these words sound – these promises that the servant of God will not break you, will not quench your flame. The servant God sends into the world is tender and faithful. God’s servant does not extract justice by force or might or by breaking others down. Instead, God’s servant, Paulsell writes, “protects what is weak until it is strong enough to stand, and keeps gentle hands cupped around a weak flame until it can burn on its own.”²

“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.” These are the words that Jesus said to his followers later in Matthew - -see, I was sent to do this. I am the servant of God. This servant was sent to lead God’s people in a new way. The Servant Song from Isaiah ends with the words, “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.” Jesus has been called to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon. If you look at his entire ministry through the lens of this passage, you see it all here. Jesus did indeed care for the bruised and those whose wick was dim – he cared for the sick of body, mind and spirit. He did not crush or extinguish them, but stayed with them until they were strong and burning bright again. He called for justice and equality, sitting at table with the outsiders who were not welcomed by anyone else – ministering to the overlooked, outcast and unclean. He cared for the brokenhearted and unwelcome. He brought justice for those who needed it. And yet he did it all without raising a sword or entering into battle.

We are reminded that it is the God of creation – the God “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” – it is God who called Jesus to be God’s servant and do a new thing. In Jesus’ baptism he was at the beginning of a new way of being. No one had ever existed like him before, and no one ever would again. At his Baptism, Jesus is identified as God’s beloved and as God’s servant. And this is where the real work begins for him.

¹ (Paulsell 2010)

² (Paulsell 2010)

And so it is for us as well. In our baptisms, we too begin our work as children of God, we begin our ministries, and begin to live out our callings as servant leaders. God does a new thing in our lives at that moment, but it is not the last new thing God will do in our lives. Next weekend the Strategic Planning leadership Team begins their work of listening for the new things God is doing in our lives as a church, for listening to the new ways in which God is saying to us “you are my servants and I am not finished with you yet.” Please be in prayer for the servants who are leading this process, and for our congregation as we move through it.

Baptism is not the end of hearing God say to us “you are my beloved,” nor is it the end of hearing God say to us “here is my servant.” It is the beginning of a lifelong hearing those words said to us. Sometimes they are whispered quietly in the night, sometimes they are shouted from rooftops. Jesus ministry did not end when those words from Isaiah echoed through his head and he emerged from the waters, rather it was just beginning. For us, as this new year begins, as we settle back into routines and catch our breath after the busy-ness of December, I encourage each of us to ask how we are called to be servants of God. Not how we are called to serve God – that looks a lot like a to do list. How are we called to truly be servants. Have we been causing deeper bruises to those already bruised as we have gone about our work? Have we been extinguishing wicks that burn dimly rather than sheltering them from the wind and helping the flames grow stronger? The God who created the heavens and the earth called us to be God’s servants – and gave us the model to follow in Jesus Christ. As we consider all of the things that come with a new year, all of the resolutions and things that come with it, I encourage you to think about this: God said “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.” What kind of servant will you be this year?

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January 9, 2011
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Baptism of the Lord, A