

“Justice at the Core”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Isaiah 49:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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Baptism of Christ

I don't know if teachers still create quizzes using two columns, where the quizzed are to draw a line to connect an item in the left column to its match in the right column. For example, you might have “New England Patriots” in one column, and you match it to “lost to Pittsburgh Steelers in playoffs.”

Seriously, perhaps the two columns have words to be matched as synonyms; or one column has capital cities to be paired with their countries in the other; or one side has symbols of elements in the periodic table to be connected with their names.

In a way, the prophecy of Isaiah has served as one such column for Christians. Some even nickname Isaiah as the fifth Gospel, because through this prophet we find many of the characteristics of Messiah. We read Isaiah during Advent, as we await Messiah, and we pick it up again during Lent when we consider what are called the servant songs, since Jesus was not the anticipated Messiah of armed power. So, we might think of a left column containing a list of characteristics of Isaiah's servant as well as a list of what was expected for a Messiah. Then it is up to us to choose which characteristics connect with Jesus – and in this matching, there will be multiple lines drawn.

As we mark Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist this morning, the lectionary couples it with the first servant song in Isaiah 42. As Barry reads it, I have asked him to pause between two distinct parts.

First, God presents the servant – “Here is my servant...” - and while it seems as if the servant should be alongside God, the servant is not identified by name, but by characteristics, using the word “justice” three times.

Then, beginning with verse 5, it is as if God turns and has a one on one conversation with the still unidentified servant. God reviews the servant's job description, saying, “This is who I have called you to be, and how we will work together to restore creation,” summing up with, “You will be a light to the nations.”

[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.

From last week's reading to this week's, our Gospel lesson jumps thirty years, from a babe in a manger to a man on a mission, from the visit of magi from the east to the baptism by John at the Jordan. Both the baby and man are Jesus. Only Luke's Gospel inserts an adolescent story of Jesus with rabbis in the temple.

As Jesus comes to the Jordan, Matthew's Gospel alone has a conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist down by the riverside, where John is baptizing sinners who have come to repent. This brief dialogue is our sole source when we ask the question posed over the ages: Why would Jesus need John's baptism of repentance? Even John the Baptist wonders.

As we will hear, Jesus will still John's protest with the answer, "To fulfill all righteousness." Elsewhere in Matthew, fulfillment language usually references a Hebrew Scripture, but this fulfillment stands on the word righteousness, and its implications of insuring people and events are in right relationship with God and each other.

I will not be focusing on the "why" of Jesus being baptized, but let me offer a few more thoughts before we hear our Gospel reading. First, Gospel baptism accounts are silent about Jesus' sin, so setting up a special investigative committee to discover if Jesus really needed John's baptism will lead to a dead end. Second, and perhaps most prominent, is that John will be spot on when he suggests Jesus should baptize him. John understands the order of greatness. With his words, he affirms Jesus' authority, and then accedes to it by baptizing Jesus, thus fulfilling righteousness. Third, if this was a theater production, John's baptism of Jesus is the cue for God to open the heavens for a dramatic announcement; as in Isaiah, with God presenting the servant, God will now present the beloved son.

Jesus' baptism, as recounted in Matthew 3:13-17:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'*

Jesus did not just happen to be out for a walk one day, stumble upon John baptizing at the River Jordan, think it looked like fun, and join in. Neither was his baptism a populist strategy to gain the favor of the common people, particularly with sinners, though he would have been standing alongside those awaiting their baptisms as he spoke with John the Baptist that day. The verb "came" – "Jesus came... to John at the Jordan to be baptized..." – infers intention, not happenstance.

As one writer describes it, "Duty and destiny come together when Jesus stands on the side of the river with sinners and submits to baptism, and John, uncomfortable and unworthy, submerges the divine in the waters of the Jordan." [Duffield, Jill, Looking into the Lectionary for Baptism of Christ Sunday, 2017 – online email sent to Presbyterian Outlook subscribers]

Recorded decades after the baptism, the Gospel writers all follow the baptism with a presentation of Jesus to the world. It is that presentation, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” I would like us to consider this morning, alongside God’s presentation of the servant in Isaiah’s prophecy.

The dove that descends on Jesus will remind readers of the dove Noah sent out from the ark to find life, and after an olive branch was retrieved, God’s work of a new creation began. Interestingly, doves were also known to be the servants and messengers of the Roman god, Zeus; so at the Jordan, God’s new creation is entering through a servant willing to stand against the gods and empire of Rome as well as the ruling religious elite of Jerusalem, none of whom are fulfilling God’s intent for the creation and its people. [Carter, Warren, Matthew and the Margins, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005) p. 103]

Again, we look to Isaiah for the characteristics and descriptions of the work of the servant and list them in the left column. As we then draw lines from each servant characteristic, we notice how many are connected to Jesus, thus identifying him as the servant of God.

Isaiah describes a divine closeness between God and the chosen servant – affirmed as well at Jesus’ baptism. There is also an endowment of the servant with the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove descending upon Jesus from the God-opened skies. [Feasting on the Word, Year A, volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 221]

We who follow Jesus also see him in the other characteristics of Isaiah’s servant as we read of his ministry, as he creates a revolution through a resurrection. Isaiah sets aside the proud and powerful Messiah to present an equally strong, but unassuming and gentle servant. This servant will also be persistent in justice for the most vulnerable. We see that in Jesus.

In my study, one writer caused me to pause at a verse I often read right past – “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimmed wick he will not extinguish.” This week they grabbed my attention. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimmed wick he will not extinguish,” reflect what I would call the servant’s insistent gentleness with, and advocacy for the vulnerable.

A bruised reed was thought to be expendable, not worth the time to repair or care for. The poor are often considered expendable, and a burden on society, particularly if they are not willing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps; never mind, they may not have a pair of boots. The disabled child, or injured soldier may be thought expendable, a burden on schools and medical institutions, draining resources that could be used by the more abled, or to buy more weapons of national defense. The aged and frail are expendable, for they have lived too long, and are using up Medicare and Medicaid funds at a crisis pace. A bruised reed, and bruised people, are often thought expendable.

Not so for the servant God presents, or for the Son God calls beloved. *A bruised reed he will not break...; he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

A dimly burning wick is inefficient, and can be extinguished with few noticing. The hungry and poor are often hidden and can be ignored or extinguished with few noticing. The lonely, the distraught, the depressed are often left to themselves – and those who grieve are allowed a certain amount of time before we expect them to get over it. It is as if their dim flame can be quenched with few noticing. A dimly burning wick, and fragile people, can be extinguished with few noticing.

Not so for the servant God presents, or for the Son God calls beloved. *A dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.*

God speaks to the chosen servant, *I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind...* Prisons in biblical times were underground, with the only light being that which guards carried. And so God's chosen servant will perhaps literally and figuratively be the light that brings *out the prisoners from the dungeon, [and] from the prison those who sit in darkness.*

To do so this servant, this light will be willing to visit those in dark places, those crouching in fear, those deemed expendable or extinguishable. So, how fitting Jesus intentionally came to the Jordan to be baptized, and stood with sinners while there.

As Jesus, the servant, the light to the nations emerges from the Jordan, we understand his presentation by God is also our invitation from God, not only to follow Christ as the light, but to reflect his light. God counts on the light we reflect to open eyes of those in darkness, or those about to have their wicks extinguished.

As we connect the many characteristics of Isaiah's servant in the left column to Jesus in the right, we notice there is another phrase in the left column – "servant of Christ." Then, in the right column we see our names, and we see the name of our church. Can we draw the line between to connect servant of Christ and ourselves?

We can if we take on the characteristics of the servant, if we can envision ourselves among the sinners standing with Jesus at the banks of the Jordan, and have the courage to follow him along a journey of insistent gentleness and justice, with a commitment to be the voice of the most vulnerable of our own nation and culture.