

Baptism of Christ/1st Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.8.23

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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

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: 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, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 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. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 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. 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. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (355)

John had gone out to the Jordan to baptize. You might remember this. We heard that first part of this story last month, when John, the baptizer, Jesus' cousin, is said to have gone out to baptize in the river Jordan.

Then, people from all Jerusalem and Judea went out to be baptized. Even Sadducees and Pharisees went out, these two groups of men who had nearly nothing in common but that they were religious authorities. Sadducees were the elite; Pharisees were more populist. The two groups, just so, probably felt a mutual suspicion, if not disdain.

John had still less admiration for either, for both. "Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?" Such was John's greeting reserved for these two groups.

He went on: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

For what it's worth, Matthew, the gospel we'll follow this church year, was written by someone who seems to have had himself a lot of disdain for the religious authorities of his day. For this reason, the writer is taken to have been a devout Jew who'd have felt especially betrayed by those whom he regarded as authoritative selling themselves out, whether to their own greed or ambition, or to political power or social respectability.

We see this in Matthew's remembering John as especially incensed by the religious authorities coming out for baptism. In the Gospel of Luke, John is presented as just so incensed but by the crowds in general. Matthew's rendering has John more focused—but also just as expectant that the one whose coming he was there to proclaim would come with an equal measure of umbrage, equally enraged. He swore, John did, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

This is the first half of the story whose second half we just heard this morning. And it's awkward, it's being sliced in half like this—that we would get John's voiced expectation four weeks before we get the moment of fulfillment, when Jesus finally comes out to be baptized. It's literally a verse later according to the text. But in the liturgical year, it's a month apart, from early December to early January. What's more, it's two seasons apart, from the season of Advent and all its expectation, through the (albeit very short) season of Christmas, finally to the season of Epiphany, with its fulfillment and dawning understanding.

And it's hard to say which is truer to the whole experience—whether the month of waiting and mounting drama makes the most theological sense, or if the but one-verse shift from expectation to arrival makes more theological sense, *Christological* sense.

On the one hand, the longtime waiting from Advent to Epiphany seems right. After all, the one for whom we're waiting is a big deal and therefore should have us preparing in proportion to that. The prince of peace. The savior of the world. The one to bring close the kingdom of heaven. King and God and sacrifice. I mean, how many ways have we named this person? How many modes and metaphors might we rightly employ in order fully to indicate and to understand? All the fuss, then, of Advent and Christmas: it makes perfect sense.

On the other hand, the one to arrive, eventually to arrive, in but a moment to arrive, is just some ordinary guy, or so it sort of seemed. Jesus, with a name as ordinary as any name. From

Nazareth, which was just some ordinary town. (I mean, can anything good come out of Nazareth?) This, John's cousin. This is Mary's son, James's brother. This is someone who'd live, and would eventually die, having never learned to read, having never married and had children, having never traveled more than a day's journey from his place of birth except as a baby when his parents had to flee. This is the one who was to come? This is the one for whom we waited?

Because we know how gods are supposed to show up in the world. They're supposed to be evidently powerful. They're supposed to be obviously beautiful. The gods well storied in the ancient world were glistening and curly-haired. The God of the Hebraic world, by some contrast, was to have as representative someone also mighty, some great warrior like David or some outspoken prophet like Elijah. This Jesus, though. This Jesus...?

Last month, when we heard John speak of him, when we heard him promise what sort of things he would do—clear the world as if it were a threshing floor littered with chaff, throw all the unworthy bits into unquenchable fire—it opened a question whose answer was yet to be settled: would he really do these things? Would he actually do these things, or was this but John's hope and expectation, and then also Matthew's John's hope and expectation?

The next week after hearing the first part of this story we flashed ahead to when Jesus had begun his ministry, had begun to serve in the world as God's Messiah, as God's beloved son. And John was in prison then, was languishing in prison. And Jesus wasn't doing anything about it. So, John sent his disciples to ask about that: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Because John was beginning to have his expectations dashed...

This week we inch another step closer to an unnerving possibility. Maybe this guy wouldn't get around to our laundry list of grievance and retribution—which is a long list, full of worthy matters. There is so much in this world so ferociously unjust, so gaping in need of a few vengeful strikes.

The suffering servant: this figure in the prophecy of Isaiah is a mystery. With four songs in the middle portion of this prophetic book, this servant is prominent. But it's never made clear who exactly this was. Whom did the prophet mean it to be? So, the question is thrown open to history and interpretation: who was this? The one "given the tongue of a teacher that the weary might be sustained with a word." The one "despised by the nations" yet given as a light to the nations. The one who "bore our infirmities and carried our diseases," who "was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" and whom "we accounted as stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted": who was this?

Isaiah, of course, prophesied about 500 years prior to when Jesus lived, at a time when Israel as a people was suffering oppression, exile. Assyria had attacked, had taken this small nation of people into its ever-engulfing empire. So, a most common interpretation is that the suffering servant was Israel itself. Israel was the one who would bring God's justice to the earth. Israel is the one who will be a light to the nations, and will restore all in righteousness, and whose wounding and humiliation might even bring redemption to the world.

Our gospel writer, some five hundred years later, no surprise, saw this one as Jesus—and so used the words and images in these strange “Servant Songs” to give sense to who Jesus was in the world, intelligibility as to how Jesus was to be understood, and is to be understood.

Those who decide on the lectionary doubled down on this. Choosing the first of the servant songs as the prophetic reading for today underscores this thing that would surely disappoint the likes of John, that Jesus would be less about throwing chaff into unquenchable fire and more about protecting bruised reeds from becoming broken in the world, more about taking care that dimly burning wicks not be snuffed out altogether. Really, Jesus would be more about taking on the wounds of the world than about doling out some fresh ones, even if apparently well-deserved ones.

What's more, God would bless this gentle way. God would vindicate this one whose force was gentleness: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I well pleased.” And by this fierce gentleness, the world would be saved, the world will be saved.

It's interesting, perhaps, to notice that the other gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism have the voice from the cloud addressing Jesus himself, “*You* are my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” It's as if in those accounts something new is being revealed to Jesus. In this account, by contrast, it's the world that needs addressing on this issue of identity, manner, and vindication. “*This* is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I well pleased.” It's as if, according to Matthew, it's the world that needs to come to an understanding about what makes for son-ship, for belovedness. It's as if it's the world that needs to come more truly to recognize that marks of son-ship aren't special power but are special wisdom as to how to deploy power—how and when and in regard to whom and why.

Truly, it's as if the world needs to come to an understanding, a new and newly sure understanding, that to be beloved of God isn't as to be set above in violent judgement but to be set among in self-giving service. Indeed, to be beloved of God isn't to be sent out in such a way as coerces following, compels devotion, compels by the threat of violence (“Follow me, or else...”) or

the tacit promise to be released from coming violence (“If you follow me, I won’t punish you..”) No, to be beloved of God is to be sent out among in such a way as has gathering appeal, the appeal of love, the appeal of care, freely offered to be freely received.

This is what makes for belovedness. This is the fruit and sign of belovedness. And it is this which is revealed on Epiphany and over the course of the season following the Epiphany.

January 6th, the 12th day of Christmas, the day of the Epiphany, when the Magi have arrived and are given to see, given over to worship. This new insight, this new understanding: it's an irony of history that January 6th no longer rings out as the date of the Epiphany of our Lord. Not that this date was ever much known in our society, January 6th now means something else altogether.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's the same old struggle—the riot on the capital, the mob come to wreak havoc. Maybe it's the same old struggle. Who is in charge? Who is the rightful king? And how much violence will justify the throning of the rightful king?

The wonder of the one whom we confess as king is that he subverts all the trappings and privileges of kingship, that he consents to the ways of the world in the interest of redeeming the ways of the world and bringing in close the reign of heaven—all of which he will do by healing and calming, restoring and remembering so to fulfill all righteousness.

The gentle way that God blesses as beloved: it's our way to move in the world as well, or it might be, it could be, should we long to be so beloved, should we hope for the world we claim to hope for—one of justice and peace, one of wellbeing and good will. These are things established less by force and more by loving care, which means letting go the satisfaction that can come of violent force. It can just feel so seemingly good to see someone get what's coming to them. It can feel even better to be the one to deliver it. But the one who is beloved of God employs power otherwise. Today we're given a model for this. From here on out, the question comes to us, whether to follow, freely to follow.

Thanks be to God.