

Justice

Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday After the Epiphany)

Isaiah 42:1-9

This passage appears in the portion of the book of Isaiah that has come to be called Second Isaiah and talks about the Jewish exile to Babylonia that followed the fall of the city of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 BCE. Today we heard one of four poems called Servant Songs/Poems ([42:1-9](#); [49:1-6](#); [50:4-11](#); and [52:13-53:12](#)). In the text the Servant is introduced as divinely chosen; endowed with the spirit; one with an unassuming character and gentleness; with a mission of establishing justice; and persistence.

Justice is understood not only in terms of what we call procedural justice or the proper and unbiased understanding and application of legal factors in courts and human relations, but also as distributive justice which is the equitable distribution and utilization of resources and responsibilities in nonlegal contexts.

In the chapter before our text the people had complained that God had not looked after his people's rights or cause. They were complaining about what they saw as God's indifference to their plight. So in our passage God reminds the people that God has not forgotten them and will establish justice in the earth with the servant's teaching. For the people of Jerusalem this meant that returning to their homeland and the reestablishment of the reign of the Davidic kings were assumed to be a channel of God's law and justice for the world.

The establishment of justice was to be carried out, not with violence or the use of overriding strength, but through humility, passivity, reserve, and endurance. God, the Creator, commissions the Servant for a special purpose and in a special way. God declares that God has taken the Servant "by the hand," therefore transferring God's

authority to the servant, in ways that the audience could understand. (They knew of the Mesopotamian ritual where the king, in the New Year festival, took the deity Bel by the hand and escorted his statue back to the sanctuary.)

The Servant had a function to perform not just to his own people but to the nations of the world, as "a light to the nations." In the same way that Abraham's call was to be a blessing to all..."in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The work of God through the Servant is described as "to open" and "to bring out." The idea is: "You shall be a light to the nations so that I might open the eyes that are blind, and bring out the prisoners from the dungeon."

The concluding verse affirms that *YHWH* is the only God who can declare things before they happen. What is coming—the rise of Cyrus, the release from exile, and the return to the land—is being declared and is as certain to happen as the former things are now past. **John H. Hayes**

Generations of biblical scholars have asked the identity of the "Servant." Historically, the book of Isaiah has been seen within Christianity as "The Fifth Gospel." We see these prophecies finding their fulfillment in the work of Jesus Christ, a point that Jesus himself made, according to Luke ([4:16-21](#)).

The reformer John Calvin identified the Servant of [Isaiah 42](#) with Jesus Christ primarily due to the Servant's work of both a physical and spiritual restoration. The Servant was a priest, a mediator, and redeemer. The Servant is one who will dutifully carry out the task of establishing justice as called by God without shouting, breaking, fainting, or quenching until it is done. This Servant reflects the character of Jesus Christ by also pointing to the self-emptying of Christ affirmed in [Philippians 2:7](#); or Christ's words according to [Mark 10:45](#), which states, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." In this way, the question of identity is raised by the very nature of the work of the Servant, which

raises the question, can anyone else do the Servant's work? Can any other person or group besides God free humanity from its fallen condition, from its blindness, from its slavery to sin? For Christians, the identity of the Servant is found in the incomparable person and work of Jesus Christ. **Jennifer Powell McNutt**

In this first of the Servant Songs that shines out of Isaiah, the prophet offers a portrait of the kind of leadership we should expect from one called by God: patient, nonviolent, merciful. God's chosen does not "execute justice" by force. This is a portrait of tender care. "A bruised reed he will not break," Isaiah says, "and a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (v. 3). True leadership 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. In this way, Isaiah says, the Servant "will faithfully bring forth justice" (v. 3).

Isaiah's portrait of God's Servant provides a genuine—even startling—contrast to contemporary models of leadership that leave a legacy of preemptive wars, secret prisons, and torture as a form of interrogation. Can you imagine a candidate for public office running on a platform of tenderly caring for the bruised reed and carefully tending the dimly burning wick? Some would call this model of leadership unrealistic, and self-defeating from the start. Isaiah insists that this form of leadership is tougher than most. The Servant called by God to bring justice, Isaiah says, "will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (v. 4). Over the quick satisfaction of "shock and awe," the Servant chooses patient, but never-ceasing, work for justice, work that takes root, work that steadily fans good ideas into flames.

Some thought the Servant was Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed Israel to return from exile and rebuild the temple. The author of the Gospel of Matthew found in this passage a prophecy about the life and ministry of Jesus (Matt. 12:17-21).

Biblical scholar Paul Hanson finds in this passage "a reflection on the nature of the response demanded of those who have received a call from God." Hanson's reading highlights the work to which this passage calls us, you and me: to help ourselves and those to whom we share hear the claim this Servant Song makes on us, you and me, as people who have been called by God to the work of reconciliation and justice.

What God asks of us is very clear: to be "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" (vv. 6-7). "Here is my Servant," God says at the beginning of this passage (v. 1). Then: "Here are you." God is talking to you and me!

Jesus took the shape of his ministry from the images, symbols, hopes, and visions of Scripture. On this Sunday on which we remember his baptism and the beginning of his ministry, we should try to hear the words of Isaiah 42 as Jesus heard them. Jesus clearly felt addressed by the model of ministry evoked in passages like these. After all, when he came to the synagogue in Nazareth, he chose to read a very similar passage from Isaiah to articulate the vision of his own ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.
(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus received these words as powerfully as it is possible to receive them and sought to mark every moment of his ministry with the vision they expressed. His ministry did take care with the bruised reed; he cupped his hands around the dimmest wicks until they began to shine. The practices that the prophet Isaiah called the people to cherish captured Jesus' imagination and ought to capture ours as well.

The vision of this Servant Song is particularly concerned with the suffering of prisoners. This text should help us feel the claim these words make on us, and guide us into practices that will allow us to respond as intentionally as Jesus did.

"See, the former things have come to pass," says the Lord at the end of this passage, "and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them" (v. 9). 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. It is the pastoral work of the preacher this day to help us hear this text as Jesus did, with our whole hearts, and to respond as he did, with our whole lives. **Stephanie A. Paulsell**

As we think of the Servant Jesus and his work for Justice, we should think of our own baptism and how God has called each of us to be servants of Justice. What work has God called us to do? In these frigid past few days when I was unable to go to work I had plenty of time to watch television. The first program that I saw was the movie "Giant" with Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor. Other may have seen the antics of a family that owned over a half million acres of Texas ranch land, but what I saw were the injustices to the people from whom the land had been stolen and the unjust treatment of those people as they worked tirelessly. The question for us is what is God calling us to do to create a world of justice for those who are exploited? Another program on public television told about two famous musicians who gave their time and resources to debt forgiveness of African and South American nations to the mega rich nations. Debts that were created when rich nations took over the natural resources of these nations, leaving them in a land of plenty without access to or control of those resources. What is God calling us to do as Servants of Justice? When we have choices of where to shop, especially when we know that many mega

stores do not pay fair wages to their worker or the people that produce their merchandise, what is God calling us to do as Servants of Justice? When we chose where we will eat and how much we will tip, what is God calling us to do as Servants of Justice? Jesus is our example and if we are faithful to our baptism we will find ways to minister to the nations that will bring help to those who are exploited and need God's peace and hope. We believe in the "priesthood of all believers" in this season of Epiphany. Israel received from her prophet Isaiah what the church received from its Christ, and that is what the church testifies to the world—the revelation that the God who creates is a just God who restores sight to the blind, freedom to the captives, and grants strength to those who serve, as God has called us to do. **Richard F. Ward**

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