

The Delight of God

Matthew 3:17-23; Isaiah 42:1-9

January 9, 2011

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 on 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 on 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.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

I was going to preach on what you heard Lisa read from Matthew a few minutes ago. Today is the day we remember Jesus' baptism and consider what that means for those of us who follow him. Matthew tells the story about how happened, so it seemed logical to preach on that passage. But then I remembered a skinny little stack of Bibles that I used to see when I worked as a chaplain in Atlanta. You've probably seen them before...the book consists simply of the Psalm and the New Testament. I quickly changed my plan – because I think it is important that we understand that the passage you just heard from Isaiah is the antecedent to Matthew's story.

It's a question that has been around since the beginning of the Christian church: how do we treat the Old Testament? Some people leave it out completely. They don't read it, they don't preach on it; it is a relic of another religion. Others use it as a treasure map: they gloss the Old Testament to hunt for references to Jesus. What gets left behind are a bunch of stories and laws that seem detached from our faith.

There is another way, which is what you will find in your pew Bibles. That way is to see the Old Testament as a part of scripture; and while the birth of Jesus signals the fulfillment of God's prophesy as the messiah, the Old Testament still has a lot to say for us apart from that fulfillment. Most importantly, the Old Testament was the Bible for those who we read about in the gospel...and for the one we call Lord.

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The way Matthew tells it, when Jesus came to John to be baptized in the Jordan—after some confusion over who should baptize whom—the act took place and, as Jesus emerged from the river, he heard a voice coming from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” They were familiar words. If we were hearing this story around the time Matthew wrote it, those words would strike the tuning fork and start the hum of Isaiah:¹ “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights...”

¹ The metaphor was used by Scott Black Johnston, then Pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, now Pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City.

If we were hearing this gospel in Matthew's time, we would know that this servant in whom God delights is about the business of justice.

Indeed, the entirety of the passage from Isaiah is centered on bringing justice...not just to a few people, but to all the nations. If we were familiar with Isaiah, we would know that the significance of Jesus being baptized was not about washing away sin, but rather about a decision to engage in a lifetime of working for justice for all peoples.

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Justice. The Hebrew word is *mishpat*, and it appears seven times in today's passage. It is one of those things that is hard to argue against. Who isn't for justice? It is also a word—when used in the church, and from this pulpit—that triggers a response in us.

Some of us hear justice, and our fires are lit. It is about time, we think. We are passionate about seeking justice...often so passionate that we throw caution to the wind and doggedly pursue the just end no matter what the cost. We can't get enough talk about justice...and it makes us feel good to have it be the focus of our life as a church.

Others of us hear justice and we roll our eyes. We may even remember the infamous words of a popular radio personality who crusaded against using the "J-word" in church. Here they go again, we think. What ways are they going to make us feel guilty this time? We come to church to hear the good news, to learn about God...*to worship*... not to attend a protest rally.

Yet others of us hear the word justice, and we shrug and listen casually. We think justice is a nice idea, as well as a nice side effect of what it means to be a Christian and go to church. We just hope that the church will be practical in the ways we pursue it.

The description of justice that we find in Isaiah turns all of us on our head. Isaiah reminds us that justice is not a by-product of our faith,

but central to what it means to believe in God. Isaiah also teaches us that the means we are to use for seeking justice should be just. The text is clear about how God's servant is to treat those who are more luke-warm about their pursuit of justice: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." Self-righteousness is not in the plan.

Today's text in Isaiah is often called the "first servant song." And so the question becomes: who is this servant? Staying in Isaiah, it becomes less clear whom God is addressing. As the Church, we are trained at first to point to Jesus Christ. Certainly, Jesus' ministry embodies this sustained, relationship-based thirst for justice. Yet it is just as easy to interpret this as a word for the people of Israel. This passage was written for a people who had just endured the judgment of God and now they were living into God's promises. God is reminding them of whose they are and of their calling as a "light to the nations." And how about us? As a part of the covenant people of God, could this passage be about us as well? Could we be the ones in whom God delights and calls to work for justice for all peoples?

Well...yes. Yes it is Christ, yes it is the people of Israel, yes it is us. God delights in it all. We know God delights in this because when the time came for our savior to *make a decision*—to climb down in the mud of the Jordan river to be baptized and to live into his calling—he did it with a grace that triggered the voice of God: This is my son; I am pleased with him.

You see, it is not enough to be saved; it is not enough to be treasured. Jesus was already all of those things, and yet he went down to be baptized anyway. It wasn't about saving. It was about living. Jesus made a decision to start his public ministry and when he broke the surface of the water, his sustained work for justice began. In a lot of ways, what happened to Jesus at his baptism is what happens to us at our confirmation: we decide that we are going to respond to the claim that God has put on our lives, and then we start doing something about it.

I used to hear the question all the time when I was younger: “are you saved?” I’m sure those of you are in middle and high school hear it pretty often, too. When I was younger I struggled with how to answer that question – but now I think I would say, “yes, and I’m trying to live up to it every day.”

Our baptisms not only mark us as God’s people – they mark us for God’s service. We are not simply saved, we are called. Called – not to seek a comfortable life for ourselves or to revel in our salvation – but to respond to that salvation by a life of service to God who promises a world marked by justice for all people.

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Seeking justice isn’t a political issue; it isn’t a partisan issue; it isn’t a humanitarian issue – it is a baptismal issue.

And there are lots of opportunities. As yesterday’s events show, we live in a world that is still a long way from God’s vision. It is not hard to find the places where justice has yet to break forth – but we have to understand that it is our duty to pay attention and to get involved.

I know that “seeking justice” can seem like an amorphous and overwhelming proposition; easy to say, easy to preach, harder to do... but here’s a start. As a church that is spending an incredible amount of money to stay where we are in a renovated building, I think we have a particular, baptismal, calling to pay attention to the needs of our neighbors.

Where in the Highland community are there opportunities to work for justice?

Why is Creswell Elementary School failing?

Why is the crime rate for Highland elevated compared to other parts of the city?

Why are there people worried about where they will eat their next meal?

What can the churches who surround this neighborhood share in ministry together?

These are the questions posed by our baptism...and the good news is that the one into whose life, death, and resurrection we have each been baptized – is still at work, even through us as his body in the world, to hasten the day when these questions and others like them will have answers.

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