

Divergence on the Lectionary - Baptism of Our Lord, Year A

First Reading

Isaiah 42:1–9

Behold 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 aloud or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

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 on it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
“I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness;
I will take you by the hand and keep you;
I will give you as a covenant for the people,
a light for 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 carved idols.
Behold, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth
I tell you of them.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Acts 10:34–43

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 3:13–17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, 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 thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

The first four verses of this week’s reading from Isaiah comprised the first of what are known as the four “Servant Songs” of Isaiah, sometimes also called the “Songs of the Suffering Servant.” These four “songs” are found in Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12. I will append all four of the Servant Songs to the end of this section on the First Reading to save you some page flipping. They will all be familiar to you, as we read them all as part of the lectionary every year, especially during Lent.

The question that presents itself as we read these passages is, “To whom do they refer?” We as Christians believe that they refer to Jesus, but Rabbinic interpretation of them often says that they refer to the Jewish people as a whole. Scholarship on these passages that I have read suggests that Isaiah may have had himself in mind, or a nameless individual of the exilic community in Babylon.

I don't think it's particularly fruitful to try to narrow it down to one answer. To one degree or another, our answer to the question will always be predetermined by our beginning place, decisions we have already made about who Jesus is or was, and the nature of prophetic speech. I personally do believe that, while Isaiah did not have a clear or complete idea of how this Servant would manifest Himself in history, he nonetheless did envision the One we know as Jesus of Nazareth. This does not, however, preclude the way that these four passages functioned among God's people in the centuries beforehand. Those meanings and interpretations seem to me to be valid within their own contexts.

One thing is also common among scholars writing on the Songs of the Servant. Many of the Christian commentators on these passages believe that they contributed greatly to Jesus' self-understanding, and His understanding of His mission. That caused me to reflect for a good while on just what it must have been like for Jesus, growing into manhood and coming to grips with Who He Was and what He was called to do. We know so little of his years prior to His emergence at His baptism apart from the story of His dalliance at the Temple when He was twelve, which shows us a remarkable sense of self-awareness for that age.

Still, the evangelists found nothing else worthy of note from his childhood or early adulthood worth sharing with us, so it does seem that something profound changed when Jesus presented Himself to John at the Jordan. Did these passages from Isaiah inform Jesus' choice to be baptized by John? Did He already have a rough idea of where His life would lead? Or did the descent of the Holy Spirit at His baptism change the way He understood the Servant of Isaiah, cementing His identification with the one who'd been prophesied?

I am not comfortable saying for sure one way or the other. I do think that pondering that question though can be fruitful for us as we seek to discover the heart of the Father at work in the Songs and in the life of the One we have come to know as the Servant, Jesus. Personally, I find myself drawn to a combination of the two. I think that these passages likely held a real fascination for Jesus prior to His baptism, but that their meaning for Him and His life were only fully revealed through the gift of the Holy Spirit He received at His baptism. Even then, we know that Jesus daily went off in the early morning to

pray alone, and I imagine Him meditating frequently on these words and letting them soak His self-awareness.

I really do hope some of you reading this will use the comments feature of this page to add your own thoughts or imaginings about this.

You'll find all of the four Songs of the Servant below.

Isaiah 42:1–4

Behold 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 aloud or lift up his voice,
 or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
 and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
 he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
 till he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his law.

Isaiah 49:1–6

Listen to me, O coastlands,
 and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The LORD called me from the womb,
 from the body of my mother he named my name.
He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
 in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
 in his quiver he hid me away.
And he said to me, “You are my servant,
 Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
But I said, “I have labored in vain;
 I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
 and my recompense with my God.”

And now the LORD says,

he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

Isaiah 50:4–11

The Lord GOD has given me
the tongue of those who are taught,
that I may know how to sustain with a word
him who is weary.
Morning by morning he awakens;
he awakens my ear
to hear as those who are taught.
The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious;
I turned not backward.
I gave my back to those who strike,
and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard;
I hid not my face
from disgrace and spitting.

But the Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like a flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame.
He who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who is my adversary?
Let him come near to me.
Behold, the Lord GOD helps me;
who will declare me guilty?
Behold, all of them will wear out like a garment;

the moth will eat them up.

Who among you fears the LORD
and obeys the voice of his servant?
Let him who walks in darkness
and has no light
trust in the name of the LORD
and rely on his God.
Behold, all you who kindle a fire,
who equip yourselves with burning torches!
Walk by the light of your fire,
and by the torches that you have kindled!
This you have from my hand:
you shall lie down in torment.

Isaiah 52:13–53:12

Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.
As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—
so shall he sprinkle many nations.
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,
 smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
 we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
 the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
 yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
 and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
 stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
 and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,
 and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
 he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
 he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
 make many to be accounted righteous,
 and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
 and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
 and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
 and makes intercession for the transgressors. (ESV)

Second Reading

Our second reading for this Sunday is just as familiar to us as are the Songs of the Servant from Isaiah. Instead of a reading from Paul, we have one from Acts, the one that is read as one of the first two readings for Easter Sunday. (It can be read as either the first or the second, depending on what is chosen for the other reading apart from the Gospel.) It is Peter's brief summary of the life of Jesus and its meaning for humankind, and it is obviously chosen for us because of its reference to Jesus baptism, "...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power."

Peter then goes on to describe just what Jesus did in the power of His anointing. "He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." That leads me to ask the question, "What do we do in the power of our own anointings?" The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord is one of the days of the church year that is considered especially appropriate for baptisms. That links Jesus' baptism with our own. And so it should, because you and I were anointed with the same Holy Spirit at our baptisms. And with the Holy Spirit comes the same power. It is a challenging truth that you and I received the same Holy Spirit at baptism that Jesus did, and that through that Spirit we are empowered to do the same things He did. Jesus even said we'd do "greater things" than He did. (John 14:12) I don't think He was speaking figuratively.

So what are we doing in the power of our own anointings? I know it's terrifying to think that we could be doing so much more than we are, but it's a stark promise that is held out to us in Scripture. John Wimber used to say that we are empowered to "do the stuff" that Jesus did because we have available to us the same Holy Spirit that He had. Heaven knows we're all of us surrounded by people we know who are "oppressed by the devil" in one way or another. What if each of us took our ability and call to lift people out of that pit of oppression seriously? How much might the world change?

I myself know the heartbreak of praying to see people delivered from one sort of oppression or another, and seeing nothing happen. Randy Clark, one of my teachers in healing ministry says that this is one of the ways we "take up our cross daily" in following Jesus. Living with that frustration and discouragement, and yet getting up the next day and praying with faith that this time something will happen. Because eventually it does. And even if it happens only one time in four, or one time in ten, if that person experiences miraculous healing and knows themselves touched by God in that way, then I am ashamed to let my discouragement stop me from trying. And yes, sometimes I do let my discouragement stop me from trying. But I know what I can be, and what I can do to build up the kingdom, and it is no more than you can do or be (and likely is often less than you can do).

So, what are you doing in the power of your anointing?

Gospel Text

This year, Year A, we have Matthew's version of the story of Jesus' baptism. It includes one very important bit that the other versions leave out, the exchange between John and Jesus, where John suggests that Jesus should rather baptize him. I can imagine why that would not be as important to the other evangelists in a way that it would be to Matthew, causing them to leave it off, but these words meant a great deal to Matthew and his community. First, it recognizes (obliquely) the awkwardness of Jesus' supersession of His cousin, John. Keep in mind that in the days of Matthew's writing the memory of John and his ministry would still be strong among Jewish Christians. It is important for Matthew's community to hear from John's lips his acknowledgement that Jesus is the greater of the two. It is also important for those who know that Jesus is the greater to hear Jesus declare His reason for submitting to a "baptism of repentance." Which brings us to the second important part of this exchange, which is that reason, "to fulfill all righteousness." This is a theme we will hear echoed again and again in Matthew, that Jesus did not come to abrogate the Jewish notion of righteous living, but to bring it to its fulfillment. Jesus brings a great deal that feels like change, to Jewish Christians especially. What Matthew is constantly reminding his hearers is that this is not change, but fulfillment of all that they have held dear for so long.

I'll comment briefly on two more aspects of this week's Gospel Text before closing.

The first is that in Matthew and Mark (I do myself see the texts emerging in that order chronologically) Jesus sees the heavens open. Jesus sees the Spirit descend upon Himself.

In John we learn that John the Baptist also saw the dove. It is by this that John knew for certain that Jesus was the One about whom he'd been preaching.

In Luke there is no clear indication about who heard and who saw what. We just are told that the heavens opened, the dove descended, and a voice from heaven spoke.

I don't think these are enormous differences, but they suggest some things to me. First, that the vision of the dove and the voice from heaven were only immediately clear to Jesus and John. But Luke's telling of the story also suggests to me that the crowd gathered about them saw and heard *something*. Luke knows about the dove and the voice, but in retrospect, having read Matthew. But this is why Matthew and Mark are

clear about Jesus seeing and hearing, and don't mention anyone else. This is sometimes the way of things, and we see it elsewhere in Scripture, where God speaks and it sounds like thunder to those who cannot yet hear. And so all of these tellings of the story communicate a different truth concerning the apprehension of what happened.

The last thing I'd like to comment on is the conferral of identity in Jesus' baptism and receiving of the Holy Spirit. If ever there were words that every human being needed to hear, it would be "You are my child, and in you I am well pleased." I can almost hear the Father's joyous laughter as He declares His love, speaks His joy over His child. And I am certain that the same words rang through heaven with the same resonances of love and laughter when you were baptized.

"You are my beloved child, and in you I am well pleased!"