

“Born a Servant and Not a King!

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Scriptures

Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

Isaiah 42:1-9 (New Revised Standard) 1 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.

Matt 3:13 - 17 (NRSV) Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 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. 16 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. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Sermon

The lectionary scripture for this morning is the baptism of Jesus by the aptly named John the Baptist.

It maybe only five verses, but boy is there a lot in it to unpack.

So I'll deal with only the last two verses this morning.

Matthew sets his scene similar to the dramatic style of Hollywood, the heavens part and a booming voice proclaims

God's deep love and approval of his son.

Typically I have imagined that it was a thunderous baritone male voice that could be heard booming for miles around.

Perhaps similar to the thunder and lightening that accompanied Moses trip to the top of Sinai to receive the ten commandments.

But who's to say that it might not have sounded a bit more feminine?

Or in the much hushed tones, like the whisper that called Elijah from his cave (also on Mt. Sinai) to his prophetic ministry?

A “voice,” that in either case, was able to both pierce the heart as well as the soul and not merely one’s external ear.

But of course the content of the message was far more important. Jesus is called the “most favored Son!”

Other versions use the words “Beloved Son.”

Accordingly then Jesus was not just loved but he was deeply loved. He is very special since the word “beloved” is typically associated with our most tender and intimate relationships.

The thesaurus offers us options such as darling, sweetheart, dearest, precious and adored (just to name a few).

God is unconstrained in expressing feelings for this child.

God is busting with pride and happy to tell the world just how much that child pleases him.

But you wanna know something?...

we too are called to be children of the Most High!

Paul even says that we too, each and everyone of us are co-heirs with Christ, or God’s adopted children and so equal siblings!

We too then are just as beloved by God even though we may not believe it or accept it.

We know that all human parents are broken and of course some are very, very broken.

But no human parent is capable of loving us as perfectly as can our heavenly parent.

I would encourage us all to hear that heavenly voice as a mantra, especially in moments when we may feel abandoned or unloved.

“You are my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The other thing that most people may not realize, when they read this passage, is the fact that God was quoting from Isaiah 42.

Isaiah 42 is one of four (or maybe five?) “Servant Songs” that are included in the book we call Isaiah.

Here are some snippets from the other Servant Songs and I’m sure some will be familiar to you.

Isaiah 52:13 - 53:9. “Just as there were many who were astonished at him —so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account. Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted... By a perversion of justice he was taken away... They made his

grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Isaiah 49:1-6 The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me.... 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..."

Isaiah 50:4-9. The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.... I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced...

And some scholars would include Isaiah 61:1-3 as a fifth servant song, even though the word "servant" is not mentioned in the passage.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me... the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners...

This "Suffering Servant" Messiah, in order to "save" humanity, will choose to suffer grave injustice, but he will never give up until God's rule of justice is established throughout the earth.

As I have mentioned many times before, there were certainly other Messianic prototypes that had been promoted in Jewish literature.

Probably the most popular image, especially in Jesus' time, was the Warrior Messiah who would arrive just in the nick of time to quickly and violently crush the enemies of Israel and set things right.

But the "Servant songs" however, introduce us to a Redeemer who comes, not to wage war but to suffer and to give his life in service to others.

It will be through non-violent service and sacrificial love that true justice and peace will come - especially not through redemptive violence.

The "Suffering Servant will suffer injustice, pain and sorrow but they will persevere until God's justice is firmly established.

But now it gets really interesting, some scholars believe that this "suffering servant messiah" was not an individual, but that this "servant" was the entire nation of Israel.

The passage in Isaiah 49 passage seems to bear this out in verse 3.

The Lord called me before I was born... And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified."

In this case it is through the collective efforts of all of God's people, to work for justice, to joyfully serve others and to suffer insult rather than to retaliate that God's purpose is realized.

Certainly Jesus must still be called Messiah, Lord and Christ but as the Apostle Paul reminds us we are co-workers and co-laborers with Christ.

And if those, who are deeply loved of God, can only persevere in doing justice and loving mercy, then the world will experience God's ultimate peace we call shalom.

The baptism of Jesus makes all of us into a new creation!
And before you start thinking that I'm getting too carried away with my interpretation of God wanting us to be all lovey-dovey and to reject violence, I want to point out that God, in addition to picking the Suffering Servant option over all other Messianic prototypes also sent a dove as a sign of blessed assurance! Hmm...? Now where else have we seen that before? Way back, God had made a pact with Noah agreeing to unilaterally disarm. Never again would God in vengeance destroy the earth. Love, even back then, had become God's first weapon of choice - a love that was and is often rejected, suppressed and misunderstood. But it is a love that is lived out in a real world, a love that is hard to give sometimes and sometimes is even harder to receive. But it is a love that inspires us to give of ourselves in order to help others.

Now I'm not sure what it will all mean for us to live out fully this kind of Messianic experiment?
But if I were to hazard a guess it probably means living in ways that will often be counter to much of our present society. It may mean being called harsh names like: subversive or unpatriotic or maybe even a socialist!?
They may even start calling some of us transients, as if by simply passing through town it makes you dangerous or less deserving of help. In a world so captive to fear, following this kind of Messiah may prove to be quite risky, maybe even dangerous.

Next week we pay tribute to MLK, who I believe chose to follow that Messiah of sacrificial loving service!
I think too of our Anabaptist fore-parents, those who started the movement that we Mennonites are a part of. They too were also pierced by God's call to follow his favored Messiah. Following the Suffering Servant they too held onto those same convictions and persevered even as they suffered death and dislocation rather than going along with both governing and church authorities of their day in waging war on others. We are called to follow Jesus the Messiah, but which one? Well Matthew tells us that God does take a side and it is the Messiah who will lead God's people to meet hatred with love, the one who will inspire others to be willing to suffer injustice in order to establish justice and it is the Messiah of the collective surge of humanity that yearns to truly live lives of loving service in such ways that God's shalom will become a reality. God's true Messiah is calling us to this adventure.

Nothing more and certainly nothing less!

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