

Into Christ's Baptism, We the Servants: 2017 *Based on Isaiah 42.1-9*

Note to reader: This sermon was originally written for January 8, 2016 the liturgical date celebrating the Baptism of Our Lord. Due to bad weather/roads last Sunday, this was postponed until today.

It is well accepted in scholarly circles that the book of Isaiah was written over a long time period of Israel's history and is in fact of compilation from 3 different people, who for easy reference are known as first, second and third Isaiah. Our Old Testament text for today is the first of what have come to be known as "the Servant Songs" from Second Isaiah. There are four of these servant songs or poems in the book of Isaiah, where by "a Servant of the Lord either is spoken about is spoken to, or speaks on his own."¹ The chapters considered as those of "Second Isaiah" are thought to have been written during time of the Jewish exile to Babylonia following the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and just prior to the capture of the city of Babylon by King Cyrus of Persia in 539.² This was an incredibly difficult time for the Israelite people—they had lost their land to oppressors, much of the population was deported to Babylon, those remaining lived in a land riddled by war and occupation, their King deposed, their temple destroyed, their very way of life as the people of Moses destroyed—had their God been defeated by the Babylonians gods? Where was the God who covenanted with Abraham and Sarah? It was during these dark times that the prophecies of Second Isaiah were written, when good news was in very short supply, when God's presence was so desperately needed.

What is also generally accepted is that we cannot be 100% sure who the servants are -- in any of the four servant songs. Much conjecture and realms of writings over the millennia have speculated. Maybe it was the writer was describing himself and what he felt his calling to be, or possibly another special servant alive at the time³, some even think it could have been a about King Cyrus who, after all, was the Persian King who liberated the Hebrews from the very oppressive and brutal Babylonians. There is also conjecture that the qualities of servant hood described in the writing –this "portrait of God's servant"⁴ may not be particular to any one individual, but are characteristics of servant hood for the faithful of the community of Israel to follow, particularly those who feel they have received a call from God. For early Christians looking back at the Hebrew Scriptures for prophecies about the Messiah, was Isaiah describing Jesus? Many have thought this a strong possibility as

Jesus took the shape of his ministry from the images, symbols, hope and vision of Scripture. On the 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: (from Luke' gospel we hear Jesus say) "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 captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4. 18-19)⁵

Please pull out your bulletin insert, and let's read together the words of this servant song:

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,

¹ John H. Hayes in 'Exegetical Perspective' for Isaiah 42: 1-9 in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1 p. 219

² Ibid

³ Biblical Background pdf for Jan. 8.17 from The Whole People of God. <http://www.wholepeopleofgod.com/resources/3720/4922> accessed Jan. 3, 17

⁴ Stephanie Paulsell in 'Pastoral Perspective' for Isaiah 42: 1-9 in Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol. 1 p. 222

⁵ Ibid

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.
⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name;
 my glory I give to no other,
 nor my praise to idols.
⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
 and new things I now declare;
 before they spring forth,
 I tell you of them. (*Isaiah 42: 1 – 9 NRSV*)

This is a beautiful piece of scriptural poetry which would make a delightful bible study, but let's just touch on a few points. The passage falls nicely into two parts, firstly, the nature of the servant and the second part reminding us of our calling.

Justice is the hallmark, the focus of the work of God's servants. In biblical terms justice is more than a legal term, as we know it today. It is fairness, equality amongst all people, equal distribution and utilization of resources and responsibilities.⁶ And God upholds, strengthens God's servants, God's Spirit is upon those who work to bring about justice. This bringing about of justice is not brutish or oppressive, it is a gentle, caring way of servant hood, the bruised and hurt are not broken, the small flames of hope are not extinguished. The power of the Lord will be with God's servant, to support and keep them strong.

All is of God's creation, we are of God's creation, given breath by God to walk on earth, called by God into righteousness—to holy living. We don't do this alone, God's hand is with us, God's Holy promise, God's covenant assures us of God's presence to do God's work—to be a light to those in darkness, those imprisoned – whether in an actual jail or in the prisons of our own or society's making, the prisons that hold us back from being one with Christ, from the healing light of Christ. We are not called to do this alone, God is with us, do not do this alone, God's glory is with us, God gives us God's glory, so when we open ourselves up to that glory we can truly be God's servant and share the glory, the light and the love of God. By our baptism we are baptized into the baptism of Jesus, into his mission, his service, his servant hood.

⁶ Hayes, p. 221

“For centuries, we have practiced baptism as a rite of social conformity. This Sunday’s celebration invites us to rethink the meaning of our baptism in the light of Jesus’ baptism. Not only have we have been baptized into his mission, to proclaim the hope of God’s reign of justice, peace and reconciliation; we have been baptized into his death (and resurrection) to become, as his risen body, the living sign of that justice, peace and reconciliation for the world.”⁷

How do we do that? Well, our baptismal promises describe to us how we are to live as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus. To review the baptismal promises, see page 158 in the Book of Alternative Services.

Rev. JoAnn Todd

Anglican Parish of Hanover - Durham

⁷ John W. B. Hill [www://apl2013.blogspot.ca/2014/01/preachers-study-year-baptism-of-lord.html?m=1](http://apl2013.blogspot.ca/2014/01/preachers-study-year-baptism-of-lord.html?m=1) accessed Jan. 5, 17
(John W.B. Hill is an Anglican presbyter in Toronto, Canada)