

First Sunday after Epiphany
Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2020

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

Light to the Nations

Eternal God, at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan you proclaimed Him your beloved Son, and anointed Him with the Holy Spirit. Grant that all who are baptized into His name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess Him as Lord and Savior; who with You and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting.

From the liturgy for the
Baptism of the Lord
Book of Common Worship PC (USA)

*I have put my spirit upon him; he will
bring forth justice to the nations. --
Isaiah 42:1b*



"The River Mosaic" by John August Swanson

One of the churches I served in Florida had a Christmas pageant. Don't we all? In their case the cast was made up entirely of children – Joseph and Mary, the Innkeeper and his wife, shepherds and angels, all played by kids. Speaking roles were the most highly coveted. My own two girls waited for over a decade each to play Mary. I have photos.

As the church grew and grew, it became harder to find parts for all the children who wanted to be in the pageant, especially speaking parts. That's when Valerie, our wise pageant director, came up with the idea of adding lines for prophets to the Christmas story. Valerie's prophets say things like:

*You, O Bethlehem ... one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old. (Micah 5:2)*

and:

He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole. (Isaiah 53:3)

So, yes, prophets do belong in the Christmas story. For a thousand years Israel's prophets pleaded with God to intervene in the world's trouble and pain. Jews hear these prophecies as a call to the Jewish people to act as God's chosen servant, "a light to nations" establishing justice on the earth. Prophets from Micah to Malachi, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Hosea, Daniel and especially Isaiah, voice the people's longing for "the Anointed One" who would judge and save, not only Israel, but the whole world.

The greatest of all the prophets was Isaiah, an extraordinarily gifted preacher during the terrible period of the Jews exile in Babylon. It's likely that there was more than one prophet named Isaiah; scholars refer to them as First, Second and Third Isaiah, who wrote before, during, and after Israel's exile in Babylon. For the sake of simplicity I'll just refer to him as Isaiah. Walter Brueggemann called his work, "a mighty oratorio whereby Israel sings its story of faith." Isaiah was a poet, a visionary, and particularly in today's reading – a Messianic prophet. For Christians, especially those who know Handel's Messiah, it's impossible not to read these passages as hope and anticipation of the Savior.

He wrote four servant songs.¹ They are poems that describe the servant of God as one chosen by God to bring justice to the people and lead us back to God. Isaiah says that the servant will be a light, so that the world will see and recognize God's saving power. Listen to Isaiah. This is the first Servant Song from Isaiah 42; Isaiah speaks for God, saying:

*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 in 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 in 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.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray.

Listening God, at his baptism you revealed Jesus to be your Son and Servant; you anointed him with your Holy Spirit and called him your own. Help all of us who are born of water and the Spirit. Keep us faithful to our call to be light to the world, servants of justice and peace. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

John the Baptist was the first true prophet Israel had seen in 400 years. He preached the word of God with power, and people came from Jerusalem to the land around the Jordan and were baptized. Jesus came to be baptized, and when he was coming up out of the water, God poured out the Holy Spirit on him, as Isaiah foretold. Isaiah said:

*I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations. ...*

*He will faithfully bring forth justice
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth*

*A light to the nations ...
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon.*

Justice...justice...justice...what is this justice mentioned 212 times in the Bible? The Hebrew word is *mishpat*, and it is THE hallmark of the prophets. All the prophets – then and now – speak of it, most famously, Martin Luther King Jr.; and in the 8th century, Amos, in chapter 5 describes the need to, *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*ⁱⁱ He is claiming that what this world needs now is nothing less than a deluge of purifying water, a baptism of conversion for the forgiveness of sins.

Just what kind of justice is Isaiah talking about? Not the kind we seek in our courts where someone wins and someone else loses. Our American justice system is based on these biblical principles but it is not the same thing as divine justice.

Biblical justice is not punishment; it isn't retribution; it is more than fairness. Justice redefines fairness from God's point of view. To God, fairness and justice include grace and mercy. Cornell West has a helpful definition. He said: "Justice is what love looks like in public."

Biblical justice tempers and corrects human systems of justice. God's justice includes the awareness that some people aren't able to be treated the same because their needs are greater, or their potential begs for extra consideration.ⁱⁱⁱ

In the very first chapter of Isaiah, the prophet defines biblical justice when he says:

Wash and make yourselves clean...cease to do evil, learn to do good: seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.^{iv}

Justice means attention to the vulnerable, to treat others, especially "the least of these" with integrity and mercy, practicing grace toward those without power to secure it for them. It means to protect and defend the helpless and vulnerable.

Have you seen "Just Mercy"? I haven't, but I read the book. Dan Raymond gave it to me. It's about a young, Harvard-educated lawyer defending an innocent man on Death Row.

Failure to do justice has consequences. That is the whole theme of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. But the problem isn't just with the ancient Hebrews: selfishness, greed, and apathy are just as big a problem today. Isaiah says that the Chosen People, God's people, are to be the counterpoint to all of that; a light to the nations. Isaiah's call for justice cannot be ignored.

In the absence of justice 6th century Judah crumbled. Outside powers exploited their divisions. They became an easy target for their enemies.

You may be thinking, "We know that pastor. We've always known it; we are only one church." But our efforts, combined with the work of other congregations and groups, can change the world.

Let me give you an example. Go back with me to the 1800's in England, the pinnacle of the Industrial Revolution. Huge amounts of coal were needed to fuel the trains and run the factories. Children as young as four years old worked in factories and coal mines 12-16 hours a day. Using child labor was considered a right; children were small and nimble and could fit into places adults could not. Owners paid them 15 cents on the dollar. They developed lung diseases and lost limbs. Many died.

How widespread was child labor? In the early 1800's 50% of British industrial workers were under 14 years old.

Can you imagine? I can't. People began to ask, "What can the church do?" Thoughts and prayers hardly seemed enough...compassion, a food basket at Christmas...some used shoes and clothing given for the charity bin? It's very easy for well-meaning people to get sucked into the idea that doing charity is a reasonable substitute for doing justice.

Justice is more than compassion. Justice also involves advocacy, changing the systems that exploit. This was the time that William Booth founded the Salvation Army in London. A man named Robert Raikes educated over a million children in Gloucester teaching them to read using the Bible and the Anglican catechism on Sundays, their only day off. It was the start of what we now call Sunday school.

The most just and compassionate thing they did was change the law. At the same time MP William Wilberforce and Pastor John Newton, who wrote *Amazing Grace*, were working to end slavery in Britain. Reformers there passed a series of laws called Factory Acts, eventually making it illegal for children to work the mines and other dangerous jobs. This became the forerunner of the United States Fair Labor Standards Act.

That's just one example. Children working in deplorable conditions still exist in many parts of the world today. As Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." We have had a wonderful opportunity to practice justice this week with Winter Relief, but we can't stop when our guests leave us. We have to learn why people in our county experience homelessness and change that situation!

Will you support Woods Church as we work for justice? We are the servants of the Servant, the ones who have received his baptism, called to be light to the nations.

ⁱ Isaiah 42:1-4, 49:1-6, 50:4-9, 52:13-53:12

ⁱⁱ Amos 5:24

ⁱⁱⁱ Duane Hix, "Envy, Generosity, Fairness" a sermon preached at White Memorial Presbyterian Church Willow Spring, September 28, 2014

^{iv} Isaiah 1:16-17 **93232530**