

Baptism of Our Lord 2020

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Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 82:1-29, Acts 10:34-38, Mark 1:7-11

The scenes from our Capital this week were heartbreaking. Our nation in turmoil. Violence in the halls of Congress. Confusion as to what lies ahead in a nation so divided. Before we have time to grieve or hardly pray, voices interpreting the events, judging the events, making plenty of self-righteous proclamations. If we take the events of this week in light of the past year, can we not simply pause and cry out to God for mercy and grace. So much anger and distress rippling through the fabric of our nation.

I lift the anguish in our hearts before God even I as meditate briefly on the Baptism of our Lord.

In today's Gospel, Jesus steps out of the shadows of his private life and into His public ministry. The baptism is a commissioning. All four Gospels contain some variation of the baptism story with a word of witness from John the Baptist, from the water, from the Holy Spirit and the Father. This whole glorious event happens at the River Jordan, away from the city of Jerusalem.

This offers us a picture of two contrasting leaders. Jesus baptized at the River Jordan, and Herod the Great. Herod invested heavily in infrastructures such as roads, palaces, aqueducts, fountains, shrines and even cities. He rebuilt the Temple and even built a seven-story mountain fortress known as Herodium. If you look at all his accomplishments, you would think he was the very picture of success. In some ways, he is the very model of American leadership: in church, government, and even business.

Herod also killed his brother-in-law, strangled his wife, killed her parents, executed two of his sons, slaughtered innocent babies after Jesus was born and even issued an order to kill a group of distinguished men at his death, so the people would mourn. This last command was not carried out. For Herod, authority looks like raw power, political power, and ruthless elimination of the competition (even if that includes his family).

Now let's contrast this with Jesus. After his baptism, he becomes an itinerant teacher with a few followers. Many of his stories are confusing. Many of his followers walk away. One betrays him, and most deny him. His ministry appears to end in utter futility on the cross where he should have drifted out of memory into the sands of time. But we are still talking about Jesus. He has followers across the globe, and his followers do not consider Him as someone from the past but as their present Lord. He is risen.

Our passage from Isaiah can help us to better understand the leadership of Jesus. The opening line of Isaiah 42 is a close parallel to the word of the Father over Jesus at His baptism, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."<sup>1</sup> In Isaiah 41:21-29, God has just called an assembly to the gods of the earth. Each of these gods make exclusive claims about their rule. So the Creator calls them to account. Can they properly interpret the events of history? Can they declare the future?

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 42:1.

Their counsels fall silent. In the end, these gods are merely idols of metal images, empty wind. Then the Creator points to His servant. “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.”<sup>2</sup>

Who is His servant? Who will bring justice to the nations? This word justice brings to mind the pain and trouble of the week. In the aftermath of the chaos, there were many calls for justice, but these calls often meant different things to different people. Not just this week but on a regular basis we will hear calls for justice from the left and the right. The people who often call for justice are themselves unjust. They cannot stand under the fire of God’s judgment. Then again, we cannot stand under the fire of God’s judgment. If we are too truly cry out for justice, we must cry out for mercy.

Lord have mercy.

This word justice can help us to think about the Lord’s servant and to consider what His justice looks like in our world. The Hebrew word from Isaiah’s text this morning is *mišpaṭ* (mish-paat). The root of this word speaks of governance. There are many variations of how this idea of governance works out in a culture such as enacting laws, the role of judging a case between two litigants, the idea of rights or expectations, and even customs or patterns of cultural life could fall within this word.

The Biblical notion of justice is not an abstract idea but it tied in to the personal ruler. A just king establishes justice in his domain. The Creator is a just God and promises to bring the world to rights: to restore a world that is out of order.

The first and primary governor is the Lord. He has established the world and He sustains it. We appeal to him for help in time of need. In His just purposes, He sometimes brings down governments and nations and raises up governments and nations. The Creator is not a untouchable but is intimately involved with His creatures and creation. He responds to the cries of the oppressed.

Hagar cries out from the wilderness and the Lord answers her. He hears the anguish of Joseph in the Egyptian dungeon. In the fullness of time, He makes a way for Joseph to ascend to the highest levels of society.

Scripture tells the story of a world that is out of order due to human sin and rebellion: a world of oppression and violence; a world where brother turns against brother. Abraham is called out from the spiral of descent and the place that God will show him. In other words, Abraham is called to live under the governance of God’s promise.

The Lord is preparing Abraham to raise up a people who will reveal God’s justice in the world. In Genesis 18:19, the Lord says, “For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 42:1.

Years later, Moses is raised up as a deliverer for Abraham's offspring. Moses is also a teacher and a judge. He is modelling the way of the Lord. Eventually, he raises up a series of judges to hear the disputes of the people. He tells them, "You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it." (Deut 1:17)

He not only calls the judges to equitable treatment between rich and poor alike, he calls the judges to treat Israelites and outsiders the same. "You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 24:22)

When Isaiah points to the servant of the Lord as bringing justice to the nations, he is reiterating this ancient notion of Israel as an image of God's rule in the world. This is the image from Isaiah 2:1-5 as Israel becoming the center of God's justice for the world.

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> It shall come to pass in the latter days  
that the mountain of the house of the LORD  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be lifted up above the hills;  
and all the nations shall flow to it,

<sup>3</sup> and many peoples shall come, and say:  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;  
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war anymore.

<sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the LORD. <sup>3</sup>

Under the guidance of the Lord and His instruction, Israel was called to reveal to the world what true justice looks like. It was called to become a people who reveal the way of the Lord in word and deed. Sadly, the kings who should embody this justice turned away to idols and lead the people away from true justice to oppression, corruption, and more.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 2:1-5.

Yet, the vision remains in Isaiah 42. The Israel of God will truly become the servant of the Lord and bring justice to the nations. The church has read this passage and understood Jesus as the fulfilling the call of the Israel of God and the servant of the Lord. He is the only one who truly embodies the way of the Lord. If I want to understand the justice of God, I look to Jesus.

He reveals a justice that is alien to our world. He himself steps into the breach to make it right. Instead of destroying someone else to restore the world as Herod does, Jesus embraces the division, the brokenness, the suffering Himself.

John Oswalt writes, “God’s answer to the oppressors of the world is not more oppression, nor is his answer to arrogance more arrogance; rather, in quietness, humility, and simplicity, he will take all of the evil into himself and return only grace. That is power.”<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, let me explore what justice looks like in light of Isaiah and Christ Jesus. This is not the complete picture, but it begins to challenge our notions of justice. Isaiah writes,

I have put my Spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
<sup>2</sup> He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
<sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
<sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be discouraged  
till he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his law. <sup>5</sup>

First off, verse four tells us that the servant will accomplish his mission. He will not grow faint or discouraged till he has established justice in the earth. Jesus comes into the world as God’s servant. The world was created in and through Jesus. He is sent by the Father to restore to world, to restore proper governance to the world. To establish justice. In the midst of the kingdoms of Herod and Caesar and other rulers, Jesus establishes His kingdom that will not pass way. He does not establish it through the power of the sword but through the very life of God poured out for the world.

Isaiah says that he will not cry out or lift his voice. He does not try to dominate others through his volume or his rhetoric. He speaks the wisdom of God and trusts the Holy Spirit to draw people to the Father through Him. In other words, He does not rely on human power or human ingenuity but on the power of the Spirit.

Then Isaiah says, “a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.” The reed is not beautiful and does not grow in beautiful fields but in marshy areas. It is

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<sup>4</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40–66, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 111.

<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Is 42:1–4.

hollow and fragile. The human foot can easily break a reed by walking over it. Isaiah emphasizes the frailty by adding that it is a bruised reed. It already on the verge of breaking.

The faintly burning wick is about to go out. It is the tiny red spark in the wick and just a puff of wind will extinguish the flame.

Isaiah describes the condition of humanity, a world without true justice. A world of people who suffer under the sins of others and as a result of their own sins. We are a room full of bruised reed and faintly burning wicks. We live in a land of bruised reeds and faintly burning wicks. Those who are the loudest and boldest and strongest may actually be the most broken, the most damaged, the most wounded.

Jesus comes with healing grace. He calls to the frail and falling: the woman at the well; the tax collector; the leper; the blind. He does not break the bruised reed but actually restores it and makes a thing of beauty from it. He does not put out the faintly burning wick, but gently reignites the flame for all to see.

His ministry of justice is a reordering of the person. Yes, kings and kingdoms will fall. Oppressors will eventually lose power. But their overthrow looks very different. It is the turning of broken lives into whole lives.

As we are being healed and as our flame is being stirred afresh, we are learning the justice of Jesus. We are learning that the future is created by laying down our own lives not by crucifying others. He sends us out with healing in our words and hands. He may actually send some of us to the oppressors of the world. At times, we may even have to speak difficult words of confrontation. By His grace, we could actually become instruments of healing to the Nebuchadnezzars of the world as well as to the widow, the fatherless, and the forsaken.

In a nation that is aching and crying for justice, may we follow Jesus into the highways and byways as living images of Christ in the midst, as a people ready to pour out our lives and the speak the wisdom of God to the hurting and broken.