

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
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January 12, 2020

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

From Isaiah: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

This morning we have heard some beautiful words from the beginning of Isaiah 42—let's read them again:

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.

This passage is one of four found in the book of Isaiah that are known as the "Servant Songs," all describing a servant, chosen and led by God, who will bring justice to the earth. But who is this "servant"? As you can imagine, since Isaiah did not provide a name, there are a numerous responses to this question. We are going to explore several interpretations of today's Servant Song, as we connect it to the celebration of both the Baptism of Jesus and the baptism of our newest parishioner, Gavin Kotos.

All four of the Servant Songs come from the section of the Book of Isaiah that scholars often refer to as "Second Isaiah." This section of the book likely was not written by the original "Isaiah," who was the 8th century BCE author of the first 39 chapters of the book. Instead, this section was likely written in the 6th century BCE after the people of Israel had been defeated and exiled by the Babylonian Empire. In that context, the servant described in today's passage is one who would serve justice by allowing the people of Israel to return to their land, one who would work arduously to free them from oppression. In this light, the servant may refer to an individual—perhaps someone known to the author, or perhaps the author himself. A broader

interpretation sees Israel itself as God's servant, chosen by God to be a beacon of justice in the world, even in the face of tremendous hardship and suffering. In either case – whether the passage refers to an ancient prophet or Israel as a whole – the message is that God brings justice to the world not through a mighty empire or a powerful king, but through dedicated, humble servanthood.

Christianity adds another layer to the interpretation of the Servant Songs, viewing the passages as also prophetically referring to Jesus. While Jesus lived over 500 years after the author of Second Isaiah, their historical contexts were not so different. In Jesus' time, Israel was still ruled by a powerful empire, suffering oppression and injustice under foreign rule. And by the time the gospels about Jesus were written, Israel had experienced yet another devastating loss, with the destruction of the Temple and the exile of many of its people. Jesus, then, can also be seen as the servant – one who is chosen by God to challenge the powerful, to strive for justice, and to share God's love in the face of suffering. In fact, we see in today's gospel that Matthew himself connects Jesus' baptism with the words of Isaiah's Servant Song. Remember, Isaiah wrote, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." We hear this echoes when Matthew describes God's words at the baptism of Jesus: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The entire story about Jesus' baptism underscores his role as a humble servant, chosen by God. Jesus humbles himself to be baptized by John, and this event launches Jesus' ministry to serve others as teacher and healer.

We don't have to choose one of these interpretations over another – they can all be "right," meaning they all have something important to tell us. Whether we understand Isaiah's Servant Songs to refer to an ancient prophet, or the people of Israel, or Jesus, the message is the same: the establishment of justice, the flourishing of God's love on this earth, is not brought through aggressive might or by those of high status who wield power for their own benefit, but instead through those who are willing to serve. This message serves as a challenge for each of us – how can we serve others? How will we work to "faithfully bring forth justice"? How will we be more like Jesus – both humble and willing to serve?

The promise of today's passage from Isaiah is that God is with us in our efforts to serve—we are all chosen by God to be God's hands and hearts here on earth in order to free the oppressed and work for justice, and God is with us every step of the way. Isaiah's Servant Song says, "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you." God takes the prophets by the hand, God takes the people of Israel by the hand, and God takes each one of us by the hand. God takes Gavin, who will be baptized today, by his hand – to guide him as he navigates his life of love and service and to give him strength in the face of challenges. During Jesus' baptism, God called Jesus beloved. As Gavin is baptized today, we will reaffirm that he, too, is a beloved child of God. As God's beloved, Gavin, and we, are taken by the hand so that we may humbly serve the world that God loves.