

## Scattering the Darkness: Clinging to Baptism

### Isaiah 42:1-7 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. <sup>2</sup> He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; <sup>4</sup> he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” <sup>5</sup> This is what God the LORD says— the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: <sup>6</sup> “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, <sup>7</sup> to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

The LORD tells us through Isaiah: “Here is my servant!” (verse 1a) Great! But who is it? Nondescript stories or prophecies of a chosen one abound in various religions. But we remember from last week that the Bible’s not legend; it’s history. Isaiah is telling us that the LORD has chosen a real person to be his servant. Who could it be?

Thinking in the context of an 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Israelite, who is the chosen one in whom the LORD delights? Lots of people in the Old Testament had that designation, people like: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Job, even Isaiah himself. Even outside of Israel there were pagan people who were called the LORD’s chosen servant, people like King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and King Cyrus of the Medes and the Persians. In order to figure this out, to scatter the darkness that shrouds the identity of this chosen one, let’s draw up a profile.

Isaiah says that this servant is one “whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him...” (verse 1) So, the LORD lifts up this servant, puts him on display to be recognized. Can it get much clearer than our Gospel reading: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’” (Matthew 3:16-17) God puts his Son on display with heaven opening and alighting shining on Jesus. The Holy Spirit as a dove literally descends on him. Yes, God definitely put his Spirit on him. God the Father speaks the words of delight over Jesus, his Son. John the Baptist figured it out as he said: “I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’” (John 1:33) Without a doubt, this servant is Jesus!

Knowing then who the chosen servant of the LORD is here in Isaiah 42, what else are we told that Jesus will do? “In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.” (verses 3,4) What is this justice? Justice is the administration of what is right. Sins cannot stand before God. Sins rightly must be punished. Jesus explains that he came into this world to be lifted up for our sins, just as Isaiah also prophesied: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5) This is what pays for our sins and removes them from us – the justice worked by the chosen servant of the LORD.

But the justice that the chosen servant establishes does not end with only removing our sin. To be right with God, we must also be filled with what is right. We need to be filled with a life of perfect works. This too is done by the chosen servant as related from our Gospel reading. When John says that he needs to be baptized by Jesus, Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. (Matthew 3:15)

Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, not just for himself, but also for us. He came into this world to substitute his life for ours in order to satisfy and establish justice. With Jesus, sins are paid for and a perfect life of perfect works is credited to us. Nothing stopped Jesus from doing this. He never faltered in this mission. After 30 years of living, God the Father declared with a booming voice at Jesus’ baptism that he was well pleased with him. The only way God the Father could say that was if God the Son had lived a fully perfect life throughout that entire time. Jesus had the Father’s approval, an approval repeated when he was transfigured, an approval made certain forever by God the Father raising God the Son from the dead. He established justice on the whole earth.

What does this chosen servant have to do with me and you? Do you wonder whether you are good enough for God? Do you wonder if you have done enough to please the Lord? Do you wonder if you stand in his good graces? Do you wonder if he will judge you favorably when your life is over? Where do you look for these answers?

If you look down at what your hands have done, the charities that you have given to, the volunteer work you've done, you'll recall that you have not always been generous, that you have at times been selfish with your time and talents, that you have not done all that you can do. If you look at your church attendance to determine if you have pleased the Lord, you'll realize that you have not always been faithful in coming, that sometimes you've come for the wrong reasons, that sometimes you didn't want to be here even though you knew that you should. If you look at how you treat others, you know that you have raised your voice, shouted to get your way, to silence arguments, to get people to submit to the power of your voice. If we look at other people and compare ourselves to them, you may indeed be "better," but that does not make you just before God.

Whenever we look to ourselves for a just standing with God, for our worthiness to stand with him, we will always come up short. In fact, just failing at one point puts us on the outs with God. We cannot make up for our sins. We can't undo them. We're often blind to the fact that we cannot establish justice by our own hands. If God serves us justice based on our merits, then the right thing to do would be to send us to hell, to cast us into darkness, to be left in the torture of the dark dungeons of hell.

Yet, the chosen servant of the LORD does not leave us blind, sitting in dark dungeons of hell. No, he deals with us gently. "He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." (verses 2,3) Jesus does not yell at us until we believe in him. He also doesn't stretch us to make us break. He doesn't wait for us to sin and lose faith and then condemn us. Yes, he will smash our self-reliance that says that we can establish our own justice. But he does this to point us to him, the only one in this whole world who can and does establish justice for all people. He deals patiently with you and me in order to draw us to him, to have our sins paid for, to be filled up with the just righteousness he lived and accomplished.

God gifts us the forgiveness of sins and perfect righteousness through his gift of baptism. With his Word, with what he has done, with what he has promised, combined with water, all our sins are justly washed away because Christ paid for them. Then also we are clothed with Jesus, covered with his perfection. At the same time, God puts his name on us. This means that the approval he spoke of Jesus at his baptism at the Jordan River, when he said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased," (Matthew 3:17) this approval also extends to you. You stand as one approved by God because of what Jesus did, because he has gifted this to you in baptism!

So, when we feel like we are floundering in the darkness, wondering if I will be justified before God, cling to Jesus Christ. Cling to what he has done for you. Cling to the gifts of the forgiveness of sins and his covering of you with his perfection given in baptism. This is what scatters the darkness of not knowing where we stand with God. This is how Jesus Christ, the LORD's chosen servant, has been made "to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness." (verses 6,7)

When things get dark and you wonder where you stand with God, cling to what God has done for you in baptism. There you stand forgiven. There you stand approved as God's own child. This is the chosen servant's teaching that we put our hope in. Amen!