

“Proper For Us In This Way”

Isaiah 42:1-4

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.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan,
to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now;

for it is proper for us in this way
to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized,

just as he came up from the water,
suddenly the heavens were opened to him
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, the Beloved,
with whom I am well pleased.”

Proper For Us In This Way
Isaiah 42:1-4 and Matthew 3:13-17

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Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

The sermon I am about to preach has been 30 years in the making. Though I probably *could* have written it at the start of my ministry, it almost certainly would have *never* occurred to me to do so. While it is true the concepts involved are nothing new, as we are all quite familiar with them, 30 years of living *into* the truth of them has now made them utterly real and oh so vibrant; even urgently so. Which presents something of a paradox. How can one be at once urgent about not being urgent? How can one be impatient about urging patience? Which is the quandary in which I currently find myself.

This morning, the message I intend to lay at your feet is not only the *value* of playing the looooong game, but also the *necessity* of doing so as we allow things to unfold as they must; for it is proper for us in *this* way.

II.

The astute among you will note that this morning we are using *two* scripture readings as our homiletical touchstones, rather than only one reading which is our more usual approach. While the passage from Matthew's Gospel would surely suffice in most ways, the context of Jesus' Baptism is more fully understood in being set alongside the reading from Isaiah written more than seven centuries earlier when, we are to assume, God first put this particular ball into play.

We Christians are so very keen on understanding our faith as the end result and the fulfillment of a far more ancient story. While we are not necessarily wrong in making such a claim, too often this is for the purpose of legitimization or, even, usurpation. Which is unsurprising, but also unfortunate as it often leads us to overlook the lessons to be learned by placing ourselves on a larger scale.

III.

Linda, Arlo and I went out to lunch this week and while paying for our order I noticed a copy of the daily devotional “These Days” sitting on the checkout counter; apparently free for taking. We get 10 copies of this same publication here at the church each quarter, as it is used by several in our congregation as part of their spiritual practice. It is a very good resource and theologically sound.

However, next to it on the counter was another pamphlet, also free for the taking I assume, which was more an invitation to accept Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and Savior. Which, while not necessarily wrong or inappropriate, is always amusing to me. As if there was some particular phrase or string of words one has to utter which serves as the special sauce of salvation. More to the point, however, it is *bemusing* to consider the theology behind such a mindset which understands the individual to be the master of their own domain of redemption.

IV.

Of course, I am not alone in such bemusement. John Calvin, the Swiss theologian and architect of the 16th century Reformed Tradition in which Presbyterianism is rooted, was vehement in his opposition to any notion which understood the status of one’s soul to be subject to anyone or anything *other* than God alone. While this led Calvin, problematically, to an assertion of “double-predestination” (where the individual is either created to be save or created to be damned) at the center of Calvin’s thought was the conviction of the supremacy of God’s sovereignty over and against human action (or inaction). Which, to my ears anyway, rings the truest.

For our purposes today, though, the “take-away” is this: God has been at work in the world since the genesis of the universe and the dawn of time to effect both the redemption of the Creation (in general) and of the crown of that Creation, which is humanity (in specific); and doing so in ways which are mysterious, mystical, stunningly unexpected, completely unalterable, and wholly inescapable.

V.

Which is what we see at work in today's two sermon texts. First, in Isaiah, the promise of a plan is put forth. A servant will be sent; one God has chosen, and in whom God's soul delights. God's spirit will upon this servant to bring forth justice to the nations. This servant will not cry or lift up their 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 justice has been established in the earth. Then...700 *years* go by.

One day, however, out of the blue, our Matthean text tells us such a servant did, in fact, come from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. After John consented and Jesus was baptized, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and alighted on him, and a voice from heaven echoed the words of Isaiah, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

VI.

Here though, is whereby today's tale hangs: John would have prevented Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do *you* come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." And, only *then*, did John consent.

Though perhaps a challenge, I think it is incumbent upon us to try to imagine what this moment must have been like for John. First, some background. John is actually cousin to Jesus, and about 6 months his senior. John's father, Zechariah, was a priest in the temple in Jerusalem. Both his father and his mother, Elizabeth, descended from the priestly line of Aaron. In all probability, then, John received a thorough education and extensive religious training to put him on the path to becoming a priest. Recognizing the corruption at work in the temple, however, John apparently chose a solitary, spiritual life in the wilderness and living hard off the land.

VII.

It is theorized that John may have been connected to, or at least familiar with, the Essenes: a mystic Jewish sect living in isolated community in the Judaeian desert outside Jerusalem. Much of what we know now as the New

Testament is owed in large part to the Essenes, as they were the scribes and keepers of ancient texts which were used by, and shared among, the early church. A trove of these papyrus manuscripts were, themselves, discovered in the caves at Qumran in 1947; collectively referred to as the “Dead Sea Scrolls.”

Returning to John, he was a fearless preacher boldly heralding the arrival of the promised Messiah and proclaiming the forgiveness of sins through a baptism of repentance (or change making). That day, in Jesus, John recognized the arrival of the long prophesied Messiah for whom he had been the voice crying out in the wilderness, saying, “Make way for the coming of the Lord.”

VIII.

In a case of “careful what you wish for,” on this particular day, the Lord HAD come; and, now, stood face to face with John in the form of his little cousin, Jesus. Even more startling to him, is the request Jesus makes to have John baptize him along with all the other Toms, Dicks and Harriets gathered at the river Jordon that day. *Well*, John was justifiably hesitant, if not downright reluctant saying, in essence, “It is *I* who needs to be baptized by *you*, and yet *you* come to *me*?”

What came next is the “A-Ha” moment. Jesus puts all the cards down on the table. “Let it be so now,” he says to John. Meaning, I understand your hesitation, yes, you are reading the room (that is, the river bank) correctly, and you are spot on in your understanding of who I am. What you *don't* understand, is the scale of what is happening, and that this is only *one* moment in a plan which was put in play long, long ago. In order to fulfill all righteousness, it is proper for us to do it *in this way*.

IX.

To his great credit, John *gets* the message. Though it almost certainly did not make a whole lot of sense to him in the moment, it surely must have begun to dawn on him that this, all of THIS, is so much bigger than he had imagined, or could have *ever* imagined. God is playing the long game, and John simply needs to do his part and fulfill his role in it. Which is the very message I hope to impress upon all of us here this morning.

My great sense is that ALL of us here at our church are *very* good and doing our part; whatever that part may be, as roles change over time. Sometimes, though, we lose sight of the scale we are on. While we certainly see the value of whatever we are doing as it relates to any particular moment, inevitably we all lose sight of how what we are doing now is a result of a ball God put into play long, long ago.

X.

More to the point, however, is that what we are doing now in *these* presently occurring moments, is laying the foundation for the future God has yet to unfold before us as the story is no where near over. Though it has quite probably always been so, it seems to me in *this* day and age it is acutely the case that the weight of the Now overshadows the importance of the Always.

We feel an overwhelming sense of urgency to be define ourselves by the moment and to bind ourselves to the immediate. We have lost an appreciation of the value and the necessity of the long haul, of the reward which comes from patience and perseverance, and no long hold fast to a belief in the good things which come to those who wait. We have all become hares laughing not just at the *thought* of being a tortoise, but dismissing the very *possibility* of it. We simply have *too* much to do, *all* the time, *every* day. Busyness has become the coin of the realm, and the scale on which we live our lives has shrunk to the next mere moment.

XI.

My message to us today is this: if we find ourselves running around like a chicken, maybe it is time to consider why that might be the case? One of the secret joys of being a follower of Christ and person of faith, is the opportunity to recalibrate the scale on which we life our lives. God, through Christ, invites us to participate in and play the *long* game, just as Jesus invited John the Baptist to do that day at the river Jordan. Beyond the simple reward of becoming well within one's soul, allowing things to unfold as they must is a sign we recognize that all the small things we do to care for our spouse, provide for our family, raise our children, contribute to our community, build up our church and change the world are all incredibly important parts of God's still unfolding plan; a plan of which we have all been part of since the dawn of time and the creation of the universe. We, too, are the beloved, in whom God is well pleased, and it is proper for us in this way. Amen.