

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Isaiah 42:1-7

Sermon Title: "The Servant of the Lord" (Baptism of Our Lord)

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“And now, it is my honor to present to you a man who needs no introduction. He is a person who has traveled the world over, speaking to tens of thousands of people, teaching them his system for success. You have seen him on TV, you have read his books, and he has his own national radio talk show. He has won a dozen and a half awards for his innovations and creativity. You know and love him, so without further delay, I would like to present to you, just flown in from New York City,…”

We’ve heard these over-the-top kinds of introductions before. Maybe we were at a conference, in which some motivational speaker was going to talk, or maybe we were in a concert hall waiting to hear some special music. A guy comes on to the stage in a tuxedo – or maybe it was a woman in a long, sequin dress – and this person has to have his or her time in the limelight, so he or she waxes on for several minutes about the person or people we really want to see.

Before any Atlanta Hawks' basketball game, the announcer over the loud speakers jizzes up the crowds by asking everybody if they are ready, and if the crowd does shout loud enough, the announcer will say, "I can't hear you." Loud music fills the arena, the lights goes down, and several flame throwers near the roof spew out jets of fire. As the crowd screams and claps and dances, the announcer growls out the name of the team - "Your Atlanta Hawks" - and he growls out the names of the five starting players, and everybody applauds with great excitement.

In Isaiah 42, the Lord God makes an announcement to the people. "Behold, y'all! I got somebody I want you to meet. This is my Servant - take a good look at him. This one I am backing up to the hilt. He's the One I have chosen, and I couldn't be more pleased with him."¹

God had chosen a number of servants over a period of time. He started with Noah and Abraham and Sarah. God had Moses as a leader to remove Israel from slavery and to establish them as his own people. God chose prophets such as Elijah and Elisha to make sure the people would follow God's commandments. There were judges that took control and gave more political and spiritual direction. And

¹ Cf. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message//Remix*, 1037.

then the people wanted a king. They looked at the nations surrounding them, and they looked so good having kings of their own. It all seemed to be happenin' with those countries: They looked so rich, so prosperous, so well-maintained.

The prophet/leader Samuel didn't want the people to have a king, but they thought he was getting too old, and his sons were too corrupt to be effective leaders.² God didn't want his people to have a king, because this would mean God would be supplanted, replaced, even discarded, with somebody big in charge of things. God outlined exactly what this king would do to the people, but they didn't care. They wanted to be like every other country, and so God granted them their wish.

God had a hand in choosing who those kings would be, but not all of them listened to God. They were in charge, so many of them did what they wanted. God chose prophets to remind the kings and people alike of God's commandments, but not all the prophets did what God wanted. Some of those prophets even told the people that nothing bad would happen to them, at the time God was saying that they would be taken from their homes and sent into exile.

We then reach the Book of Isaiah, and God starts

² See the full story in 1 Samuel 8.

talking about a Servant (capital S) of his own choosing. This Servant is not another prophet to add to the long list of prophets. This Servant is not another king, who may choose to do what pleases him. “Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom my soul delights!”

In Matthew 3, John the Baptist has baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and a voice thunders forth from the heavens, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is also the Servant of God the Father, never doing anything he wishes to do but always doing as the Father wills. As Jesus would remind us several times in the Gospel of John, he can do nothing without the will of the Father, for it was Jesus’ will to do exactly as God the Father does. Kings might do their own thing. Prophets might spread their own words. Jesus, from the moment of his birth, was meant to be God’s Servant, faithfully, steadfastly, permanently.

“I have put my Spirit on him,” the Lord God says. After Jesus was baptized, the Spirit of God came down to rest on him like a dove resting on his shoulders. This was God’s seal of approval, so to speak.

Kings of Israel and Judah used to be anointed with oil. The oil on the head was not only a symbol to the people that this is now their leader, this now is the guy

you have to follow; but also the oil symbolized the hold God would have over that king while he ruled the people. The oil on the head was like God placing his hand on the whole person, and saying, “Now you are *my* leader. You are *my* representative. You are my voice box and lawgiver and faithful disciple.”

Everything the king does, he does because God wills it.

The Spirit descending on Jesus after his baptism was like that of a kingly anointing. It was a public display before the people to show them that God certainly does approve of this Person whom John baptized. He is God’s voice box and lawgiver and faithful disciple, but more than this, he is the only One who will save you from your sin. Now, some people believe that Jesus actually became the Savior of the world when the dove descended. Before this he was just some ordinary guy. This thinking is wrong. Don’t forget that Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit, so God the Father had already chosen him as his Servant to save. And as we know about the Trinity, God the Son is God the Father, just as God the Holy Spirit is God the Father and Son. So, in effect God chose himself to be his own Servant, and he was born of a virgin, and became a human being, and did exactly as God the Father wanted.

So the Servant in Isaiah’s book has the Spirit of

God within him, and being a faithful, never-ending Servant of God he will do great things for the people of the world. He will bring justice to the people of the world.

Justice is also interpreted as judgment: God is bringing judgment to the world. The Servant will look into the hearts of everybody, and if he sees himself there, he will save that person. Judgment is not a bad thing for those who have God. It is like taking a test that we have studied long and hard for. It doesn't mean the test was easy or fun to take, but if we prepared vigorously for it then we will score a high grade. For those who don't study for the test, they will fail. The Servant will look into the hearts of all, and if he doesn't see himself within some people, sadly those few people will fail.

We discover in Isaiah that God's Servant will not cry out nor raise his voice nor make himself heard in the street. In other words, God's Servant will not make a big deal about himself. He does not parade himself in front of others like celebrities on a red carpet who love cameras flashing in their faces. God's Servant does not starve for attention like many people who need to get on *American Idol* or YouTube. Christ never drew attention to himself with fancy words and awesome miracles, but he moved from one town to

another, and simply touched one life after another. The word of God moved subtly from one to another.

When the word of God subtly moves from person to person, it is received better. People will give more attention to it, because it doesn't smack them in the face and put them on edge. Hearts open to it more readily when God's word comes to them with softer tones. There is a story I've been reading, in which a woman is dressed up for a dinner date in the middle of Princeton, NJ, and her date doesn't show up. He dumps her without saying why, so she doesn't know what to do with herself. She can't eat in the fancy restaurant by herself. But a man approaches her and invites her to a free meal in a mansion of a person he knows. "Many other people will be there," he says. Not knowing what else to do with herself, the woman goes, and has conversations with others about God, because the point of this dinner in a mansion was to introduce people to God. The woman ends up having a good time, being filled with delicious food and God's holy word, and she decides to become a disciple for God, and is eager to share God's word with anybody who will listen.

I like the next verse in Isaiah: God's Servant will not break a bruised reed, "and smoking flax he will not

quench.”³ The bruised reed represents the poor and needy, who should be able to stand proudly like tall grass in a pasture but cannot, because something has bend them to the point of breaking, and now the poor and needy are limp, bent over and crippled. The smoking flax represents anybody who has lost faith in God. They should be like proudly candles burning brightly in the darkness, but something blew out their light – a disappointment, a broken expectation, a criticism or putdown – and now they stand with only a thin ribbon of smoke streaming from them.

God’s Servant doesn’t discourage people, make them feel inferior, make them feel rejected or unwanted. God’s Servant sympathizes for God’s people. He gives strength to those who have no strength. He gives courage and direction, and shines his light brightly in our lives so we may see him, feel him.

Everybody’s seen the Geico commercial, in which a man is lying on a couch, pouring his heart out to the counselor, who’s a drill sergeant in the Marines. The fake counselor/drill sergeant says, “You know what makes me sad? You do! Maybe we should chug on over to Mamby-Pamby Land where, maybe, we can find some self-confidence for you.” And then the drill sergeant throws a box of Kleenex at the man who truly

³ Isaiah 42:3.

does need help. God's Servant is not like that drill sergeant. The Servant, as described in Isaiah 42, wants to hear our complaints. He wants us to share our deepest, most troubling concerns, such things that we might not be able to share with others like our spouses or our parents or our friends. The Servant wants to hear them not to belittle us but to restore us. God wants us to talk them out with him, so together we may find answers and courage and peace. The Servant wants to mend the brokenness within us, so we may stand strong. He wants to light the fire within us, so we may shine brightly in any darkness.

“Behold! My Servant,” says the Lord. And in the Chapter 41, verse 8, the chapter before Chapter 42, the Lord says, “But you, Israel, are my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen.” The people of God were chosen to be God's people, his disciples, his example to living a life in God's holiness. It can be said that all of us, who believe Christ not only to be God the Father's Servant but also our Lord and Savior,... it can be said that we, too, are God's servants. Are we in any way saviors? No. We are to be like our Savior. We are to mirror the life he led. We too are to bring justice to people who have none: not the kind of justice that allows us to get our own way, but the kind of justice God desires for everybody. Justice, in which people

turn from their sin and embrace a life with Christ. Justice, in which people replace harm with helping, hatred for love, the need to get even with forgiveness, the need to be judgmental with mercy, just as Christ the Servant did.

We too may help mend the bruised reeds by serving others in their needs. We too may help brighten a person's spirit by telling them how special they are in the sight of God. We too may gently share God's word with somebody, who needs to hear something positive but hasn't heard anything good from the Internet or TV, until we tell them about God's care and compassion.

"But you are my servant, whom I have chosen." God has our hearts. God has our minds. God has our hands, our feet, and our mouths. We go out and be the servants God wants us to be.