

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah
Pastor John Guthrie

“A Light to the Nations”
Isaiah 42.1-9, Matt 3.13-17



I think I love Calvin so much because he reminds me of me. These Calvin cartoons remind me also that the life of the baptized is not the life of “getting a bigger piece of the pie.” And it’s not about getting the temperature or the depth of the bath water just right. In fact, in the life of the baptized, it’s not about us at all. But I’m already getting ahead of myself.

Today I want to use both the text from Isaiah and the text from Matthew, perhaps in a less than synchronized fashion, to approach the question of what baptism is all about. Or at least one facet of what baptism is all about.

Isaiah contains four so-called Servant Songs. They are passages buried in the midst of other material that refer to a mysterious “servant” whose serving involves, at least in part, suffering on behalf of others. That suffering is most explicit in the fourth and last of the Servant Songs which you can find in Isaiah chapters 52 and 53.

However, the selection we read today comes from the first of the Servant Songs, in chapter 42 of the prophet’s writings. I want to read excerpts of that passage for you again. As I do that I want you to keep two uniquely different but very compatible interpretations of this song in mind. First, the servant as the nation of Israel, which has been selected and ordained by God as the means by which justice and healing will come to all the nations of the world, not just the nation of Israel. And second, as long-recognized by the Christian community which was born some 600 years later, the servant as Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. So, I ask you to hear the passage with one ear tuned to the servant as the nation of Israel in about 550 BC, and the other as the servant, Jesus the Messiah, in about 30 AD.

¹ 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.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
 until he has established justice in the earth;
 and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you [Israel/Jesus] in righteousness,
 I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
 I have given you as a covenant to the people,
 a light to the nations,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
 to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
 from the prison those who sit in darkness.

You see, Isaiah had a new way of looking at his people, his nation, a way that must have been somewhat shocking for them. The LORD had indeed chosen and ordained them as his people, his nation, but that selection was more than just a privilege: it carried with it a tremendous responsibility. The Israelites were to be the very means by which the LORD would bring justice to the world, light to the nations, sight to the blind, freedom to the prisoners. The nation of Israel had been chosen for service. When the ancient Israelites read this passage about a mysterious servant, they were meant to see themselves, their nation, as that servant.

Followers of Christ, of course, have appropriated this Servant Song, and the other three as well, as descriptions of the ultimate Servant, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God. Indeed the voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” That, of course, after the Spirit of God descends and settles on Jesus, like a dove. Does that sound anything like what we read in Isaiah? “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.”

The mission of the Servant in Isaiah, bringing justice to the world, light to the nations, sight to the blind, freedom to the prisoners...that is exactly the mission statement Jesus gives as his own in Luke’s gospel when he reads from Isaiah in his home synagogue in Nazareth; see chapter 4. And it sounds very much like parts of Mary’s song, which we read a few weeks ago, as she praises God for what he is about to do through the child she is carrying in her womb; see Luke chapter 1. Justice, light, sight, freedom...these are what Jesus, the Son of God, brings.

There is a very strong and real sense in which Jesus is commissioned for this very ministry when he comes to John to be baptized. Of all four of the gospel accounts of the baptism, only Matthew has Jesus explicitly coming to John for the purpose of baptism. People argue over the reasons why the Son of God would want or need to be baptized, but one reason accepted by many is that he did so simply to demonstrate his unity and solidarity with us, with you and me. Regardless, his baptism precedes his ministry in Matthew. Does it not make sense then, that it serves as a kind of commissioning for service? The words that the Father speaks, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased,” are a kind of endorsement for Jesus and for the ministry on which he is preparing to embark.

Note that Jesus receives that endorsement before he has done anything in the way of significant ministry. Jesus receives that expression of love before he has done anything to earn it. It is that way with you and me, too, by the way. We do not receive the love of the Father because of anything we do, but simply because it is the nature of the Father to love. We do not earn God’s approval; God approves of us before we do a single thing, because he has made us and we are his, also ordained for service in the world.

When you and I are baptized, we are also commissioned for service. We are also servants, ordained to bring justice, light, sight, and liberty to a

world filled with injustice, darkness, blindness, and chains. Martin Luther is known to have constantly reminded his parishioners, “You are baptized! You are baptized!” And in those days in which the darkness appeared to be closing in on him, Luther would remind himself, “I am baptized! I am baptized!” Chosen by God. Loved by God. Commissioned by God for service in the world, as was the nation of Israel, as was Jesus of Nazareth.

In the movie *My Big, Fat, Greek Wedding* Toula, a girl whose family is Greek by heritage and remains very, very Greek, falls in love with Ian, a man whose family is northern European, and emphatically not Greek. Toula’s father Gus will not allow his daughter to marry Ian, except if Ian consents to be baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church.

Ian is baptized according to the practice of that church, being immersed three times (once each in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). Toula and her brother Nick are watching from the pews. Toula's brother Nick turns to her and says, "It's not so bad, huh?" Toula, who struggles with self-esteem issues throughout the film, replies in dismay, "Are you kidding? Any minute now he's going to look at me and say, 'Yeah, right. You are so not worth this.'" After a moment, Nick turns to her and says, "Yes you are."

In baptism God tells us we are so worth this. That we are his, claimed by him forever, that there is nothing that can separate us from his love. And at the same time, we are commissioned to be servants, to bring justice, light, sight, and liberty.

Tony Campolo is a distinguished evangelical and missional Christian author and speaker. He speaks about 350 times every year, and he is the author of approximately 40 books. Nancy and I have heard him speak several times, and he is great every time.

In one of his books,¹ Campolo tells the story of the day he was baptized with two friends, Dick White and Bert Newman, when they were all eight years old, in a tiny Baptist church in Philadelphia. The church was struggling to survive, and a few years later it closed its doors.

¹ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Thomas Nelson, 2000.

Years later Campolo was doing research in the archives of his denomination and decided to look up the report of that long-closed church for the year of his baptism. He writes, “There was my name and Dick White’s — he is now a missionary — and Bert Newman is a professor of theology at an African seminary.” Then Campolo read the church report for the year he joined the church. It said, “It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost twenty-seven members. Three joined, and they were only children.”

Everyone is not baptized to be a distinguished author or missionary or seminary professor, but we are all baptized for some form of service, as was the nation of Israel long ago, and as was Jesus, the Son of God.

You are baptized. You are so worth it. Now: Go serve.