

Scripture Readings for Baptism of the Lord Day

Isaiah 42:1-9: The Servant, a Light to the Nations

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.
² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.
⁵ Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
⁶ I am the LORD, I have called you 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.
⁸ I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them. (NRSV)

Matthew 3:13-17: The Baptism of Jesus

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." (NRSV)

"The Meaning of Words—'Well Pleased'"

An Epiphany Meditation based on Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17
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When we are passionate about something, when something is important to us, or when it delights us, we often use language that is filled with meaning that can only be understood by someone from the same context. The other day I overheard two teenaged boys talking. One said to the other, “Antonio Brown is SICK.” I said, “Will he be able to play this Sunday?” I discovered that in this case “sick” did not mean he had the flu.

Words are particularly pregnant with meaning when they remind us of some important time or place in which we heard them. A number of years ago I was talking with a friend just after he had his appendix out. I said, “How are you feeling.” He said, “Well, it hurts a right smart.” That’s not an expression we use much anymore. I knew it almost exclusively from talking with my grandparents. And when he said it, it stuck with me because the words were powerful to me. They drew up memories of feeding cows with my grandfather, of eating blackberry cobbler my grandmother made.

The writers of our New Testament often chose words that had such meaning. They picked words and expressions that were filled with meaning because they came from Scripture, from the stories about how God led his people in the past and the promises of how God would guide them in the future.

This is particularly evident in our text this morning. The story of Jesus’ baptism reveals the identity of Jesus and the nature of his mission through language that seems carefully chosen for the purpose. When John baptized Jesus and Jesus came up from the water, Matthew says a voice from heaven declared, “This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

This reading appears as one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday when the church remembers the baptism of the LORD, but it is also is an Epiphany passage: the heavens open, the Spirit descends upon Jesus, and a voice from heaven declares who Jesus is. Some Christian traditions combine these two celebrations. This is fitting because there could not be a more full revelation of Jesus as the Son of God than the one in this account of the baptism.

What does the heavenly voice tell us about the one who is baptized by John? The voice joins at least two passages from the Old Testament. The first is Psalm 2, which tells us how the LORD installed a king on Mount Zion and said to the king, “You are my son.” Jesus is king. In Matthew’s gospel this is why the Magi come to visit. They come asking, “Where is the child born king of the Jews. We have observed his star at its rising and we have come to pay him homage.” This is what Herod feared—that a king was born who would rule over God’s people.

But the second passage is Isaiah 42, in which the prophet describes one he just calls the “servant of the LORD.” This second passage seems to be primary for Matthew. He will quote it more fully later when Jesus is fully engaged in his ministry, teaching and healing, and the Pharisees question his authority. Matthew says this was all to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.”

When you read the Servant Songs in Isaiah, you realize immediately they describe one with whom God is pleased not because the servant wields great authority over armies and imposes his will on the masses, but because he serves God by suffering on behalf of others. And Matthew says this is the Son of God, the king revealed at his baptism in the Jordan. His authority comes from his service to us that will be summed up in his death. And this sacrificing of himself is to be a light to the nations. Every time we come to the table, we remember that this is the one revealed at his baptism, the one who died for us, the one of whom God the Creator said, “With you I am well pleased.”

