

Isaiah 42:1-9

“Behold My Servant”

The Baptism of Our Lord (Year A)

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Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.

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Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Behold 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” (Isaiah 42:1).

“Behold My Servant.” With this announcement, Yahweh announces something special, something very important. Of course, Yahweh chose to call many servants. He called Abraham, Moses, David, Caleb, Job, and Isaiah His servants. And oddly enough, God even called heathen kings Nebuchadnezzar and Cyrus His servants, since they carried out His judgment upon God’s unfaithful people. Also included as God’s “servant” are the ancient nation of Israel, whom God often called deaf and blind.

All of these servants had a special purpose in God’s plan of salvation. God certainly chose each one for His special task. They either were examples to God’s people, or they were to carry out judgment upon God’s unfaithful people.

But there is something different going on here in Isaiah 42. Here, Yahweh is making an announcement of special importance. Here, Yahweh announces this Servant boldly and dramatically: ***“Behold 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”*** (Isaiah 42:1).

It's like God is saying, *“Here He is!”* No other Servant of the Lord has received such an introduction, so this announcement signals something quite different and important about this Servant as compared to the others.

But who is *this* Servant? There is so much ambiguity in our text. But ambiguity can also enrich our reading. Ambiguity can cause us to meditate on God’s divine Word. So, who is this Servant who fulfills this prophecy?

If we were to place everyone whom God calls His servant together and look at them, Yahweh would direct our attention to just this One Servant. For example, if all these servants were placed on a table and spread out like rare coins, Yahweh would be pointing at One of them saying, *“Behold My Servant! This is the One!”*

In Isaiah 41, one chapter earlier, God provides a contrast to reveal the importance of this Servant. God pointed to the false gods saying, **“Behold, they are all a delusion; their works are nothing; their metal images are empty wind”** (Isaiah 41:29). What a contrast to the very next verse in Chapter 42! The works of these false gods are nothing, because they are nothing. Now, the Servant introduced here will carry out the Lord’s work.

Now that Yahweh has our attention, He tells us why this Servant is so especially important. And certainly, God chose this Servant much like He had chosen other servants, including Abraham before Him. Each of the prophets were chosen for their special role, including David, who sought after God’s own heart, despite his many flaws.

But again, this Servant is different. To this Servant, Yahweh endows with special gifts and importance. This Servant would **“bring forth justice to the nations”** (Isaiah 42:1d). This Servant would not only serve the single nation of Israel, but also serve the Gentiles – the entire world!

Now, this word “justice” is a judgment based on a legal decision. “Justice” is a term that defines the Gospel, which is God’s legal and judicial announcement that He has declared the entire world right, holy, and innocent. This “justice” is good news! This is good news to a world that stands before God’s court convicted of sin. This judgement exists because of the work of this Servant. And God would put His Spirit on this Servant so that He could accomplish His task.

But how would this Servant accomplish this task? Although Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, and David are God’s servants, this Servant will not accomplish this task by force. This Servant would be meek, modest, and mild. This Servant **“will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street”** (Isaiah 42:2).

Even Abraham rescued Lot by force, and Moses sent the Levites out with swords drawn to restore order. But not this Servant. This Servant would come into Jerusalem **“righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey”** (Zechariah 9:9).

Cyrus stomped his way to victory. His coming filled the coastlands with fear. This Servant would be gentle; the people would hope in the words of this Servant. **“A bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice”** (Isaiah 42:3).

In Isaiah 11, the prophet wrote that this Servant would be a “shoot” from the stump of Jesse and that ***“the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him”*** (Isaiah 11:2). It would be the Holy Spirit who would anoint this Servant to accomplish His tasks. ***“He will not grow faint or be discouraged till He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for His law”*** (Isaiah 42:4). This Servant will accomplish His task of establishing justice on the earth.

God’s people longed for the appearance of *this* Servant. Then, at the appointed time, God removed all questions about this Servant’s identity. ***“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him”*** (Matthew 3:13). John the Baptizer attempted to prevent Jesus from being baptized, but Jesus said to John, ***“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness”*** (Matthew 3:15).

“Yes,” Jesus says, *“It does seem odd to baptize the sinless Lamb of God, but this must be done, so all who will be baptized will receive My righteousness. For this must take place!”*

You see, God demands righteousness. So, Yahweh had a special reason for choosing His Servant: it was in connection with righteousness. God demands that the entire human race be righteous, but every step the human race takes proves us to be unrighteous. We have even failed obedience to God’s Law in loving God and serving our neighbor that was intended to produce a righteous people.

But the triune God devised a plan, a plan from before time. The triune God would send the Second Person of the Trinity to be incarnate to make all people righteous. God Himself would rescue His people through this called Servant.

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul wrote in Romans 3: ***“The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”*** (Romans 3:22).

As Jesus came out of the water of the Jordan River, two important things happened. First, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, and second, God the Father’s voice rang out saying, ***“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”*** (Matthew 3:17).

At this moment in time, as Jesus came out of the water, it cannot be mistaken who Yahweh’s special Servant is: He is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is God’s Servant who came to carry out His righteousness to deliver righteousness to the people.

Now, this Servant's task would be difficult. He would bring justice, justification, and salvation to the ends of the earth, but it would not be through brute force or by any show of might, but in the humility and shame of the cross.

Jesus, the Servant, came to bring atonement between God and man. And this could only be done through receiving a sinner's baptism – a washing that was not necessary for Him, but surely necessary for us, so that through our baptism into Christ, we receive the fruits of His cross: forgiveness, life, and salvation, and all by His grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, the beloved Servant.

Throughout His earthly ministry, this Servant would open the eyes of the blind and free captives who sit in darkness. But these physical realities also refer to spiritual realities.

You see, when you are spiritually imprisoned to sin, your flesh is calling all the shots. You are not in control. Your sin is in control, and you are a slave to it. Whether it's drugs, alcohol, stealing, sexual immortality. Just name it.

When left to our own devices, we are always snared by sin. Because of sin, all humanity remains blind to the truths of God. Because of sin, all humanity remains in bondage. Because of sin, all humanity are slaves to sin and are doomed to eternal punishment.

Through Christ alone, the Servant, He would bring release from sin's bondage and from the dungeon of judgment. Long ago, God destined His Servant to set us free from our evil foes: sin, death, and the devil. Because Christ died for your sins and rose again, triumphing over sin and death, He by faith in Him has set you free from bondage!

Today, we can look in awe of this Servant Yahweh foretold in Isaiah 42, because we are the recipients of this Servant's work. We are among those who have our eyes opened to the light of His grace. We are among those freed from the prison of death. We are among those called out of darkness and into His marvelous light. We are God's children whom He has chosen as His own. Amen.

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +