

*“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
 my chosen one in whom I delight;
 I will put my Spirit on him
 and he will bring justice to the nations.
 2 He will not shout or cry out,
 or raise his voice in the streets.
 3 A bruised reed he will not break,
 and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
 In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
 4 he will not falter or be discouraged
 till he establishes justice on earth.
 In his law the islands will put their hope.”*

*5 This is what God the LORD says—
 he who created the heavens and stretched them out,
 who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
 who gives breath to its people,
 and life to those who walk on it:
 6 “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness;
 I will take hold of your hand.
 I will keep you and will make you
 to be a covenant for the people
 and a light for the Gentiles,
 7 to open eyes that are blind,
 to free captives from prison
 and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah 42:1-7)*

Jesus’ Baptism Sends a Message

I’m sure you’ve all heard about the scandal that broke this week involving Governor Chris Christie of New Jersey and the traffic jams one of his aides caused in the town of Fort Lee. Whatever you think about the governor and the scandal, it’s clear that his aide was trying to send a message to one of their opponents. Actions often speak louder than words. Most of us have experienced that in our marriages, in our jobs, in our church and family life. The messages aren’t always a threat. A husband who doesn’t easily express his affection for his wife takes the time to warm her car up before she goes to work. He’s sending a message. In reality, many of our actions send messages that we aren’t even thinking about. This morning, we’re considering an action that God did and what it means. Today is the first Sunday after Epiphany and it focuses on Jesus’ baptism. His baptism was different than ours. We were all baptized because we’re sinners and we needed to have our sins washed away. Jesus didn’t need to have any sins to wash away. So why was he baptized? Because God wanted the world to see him for who he really is. **Jesus’ baptism sends a message.**

I.

The gospel lesson for today described his baptism, but it didn’t tell us what it means. But seven hundred years before it happened, through the prophet Isaiah, God explained it. **Jesus’ baptism sends a message. What does it say to us?** To understand Isaiah’s answer, you have to understand that God the Father is speaking through the prophet. He says, **“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”** When Isaiah wrote these words, God had been promising for 800 years already to send the Messiah, the Christ, to save his people. Both “Messiah” and “Christ” mean the anointed one. In the Old Testament, God anointed his chosen servants. Usually, that meant that someone poured oil on their heads, which probably symbolized the Holy Spirit working through the chosen servant of God.

Through Isaiah, God told his people that he would pour out his Spirit on his chosen one, on the Christ, when he came. In the gospel lesson, we see the fulfillment. Jesus was not anointed with oil like those Old Testament servants were, rather in his baptism the Holy Spirit came on him directly. Whether the people of Israel understood it or not, God was saying to every generation of believers, “This is the Christ. This is the one I have chosen to be your Savior.” He’s saying that to us today.

God chose to do that in baptism. Every one of us also received the Holy Spirit when we were baptized. Now, we didn’t see heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. We received the Holy Spirit through the gospel in baptism. But I don’t think it was an accident that God gave the Holy Spirit to Jesus in baptism. I think he intended us to understand that God works through means, in this case through the sacrament. The truth is, in our baptism God is giving essentially the same message that he gave in Jesus’ baptism: this is your Savior. He washes away your sins so that you don’t have to spend eternity in hell.

Isaiah saw Jesus through the power of God. He saw God’s servant coming to change the world. The life of Christ is the pivotal event in all of history. Now that he has come, nothing can ever be the same. So Isaiah talks about this revolutionary person. He says, **“He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”** In most of history, revolutionaries have been rabble rousers. They work the crowd and get them revved up. How many times have we seen pictures of mobs pulling down statues in other countries? How many people took to the streets a few years ago during the “Occupy” movement? How many speakers and writers and bloggers revved those people up to change the world? Jesus came to change the world. But he didn’t stir up mobs or lead marches or have us pull down statues or occupy buildings. He does not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

So how does he change the world? **“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”** What’s Isaiah talking about? People. He’s talking about us. How are we like bruised reeds? Think about the last fight you had with your spouse or your boss or your parents or children. How did you feel afterwards? Think about the last person in your life who died or the last time someone you cared about needed surgery. Worry and pain and fear bruise us and leave us easy to break. But Jesus doesn’t snap us off. And he doesn’t snuff us out when our wick is smoldering. That’s our faith when it’s struggling to hang on. When life hurts, sometimes it feels like our faith is guttering and about to go out. But Jesus doesn’t put us out. Instead, he fans our faith back into flame. Jesus is no rabble-rouser. He’s a pastor. He has conquered all that hurts us here because he conquered sin itself. He heals our bruises and restores our hopes by constantly repeating the good news that we will live with him forever, that heaven is our real home, that our sin is washed away, that he will never leave us or forsake us. Through constant spiritual care, he changes the world.

Isaiah says that **he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth.** No matter how good our government becomes, people will still sin against each other, they will still hurt each other, they will still make people suffer things they don’t deserve. But Jesus is bringing a new world. When he returns, all sin and injustice, all pain and wrongdoing and suffering will be wiped away. We will live under Christ, in the kingdom God always planned for us to have. Jesus was born in Bethlehem to make that happen. And he went to the cross and died to pay for all the sin of all the world – to pay for you and me all the suffering we cause other people. He knew that he was going to cost him enormous physical pain. He knew that he would face hell itself on the cross. But nothing could make him turn back. Nothing could slow him down. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane when he suffered all our human agony over death, he turned to his Father for strength and pressed on. Today, he is still pressing on. All over the world, he is bringing the Kingdom of God through the gospel. All that, God is saying to you and me every time we review that incredible day when Jesus stepped down into the water and was baptized.

II.

Jesus’ baptism sends a message. What does it say to him? It wasn’t just a message to us. It was also a message to Christ himself. But didn’t he already understand everything that God had to say to him? Of course he did. He was the Son of God. Before the world began, he consented to come into this world and serve as our Savior. So why did he need a message? Because he wasn’t just the Son of God. Jesus was also a real human being, just like we are. We humans need the Holy Spirit to strengthen us and give us the gifts we need to serve our God. That was true for Jesus, even though he was perfect. Our sin magnifies our need for the Spirit. It makes us weak and selfish and easy marks for the devil. But even a perfect human needs God’s gifts

to do God's work. Even a perfect human serves God with the strength God provides. The only difference is that his faith was perfect so it always worked the way it's supposed to.

Through Isaiah, God the Father speaks to Jesus. He points out that he is the Creator, the maker of heaven and earth and also the one who continues to create life on this earth. He is the one who gives life and breath to each of us as we are conceived in our mother's womb. He did that for Jesus, too. Then the Father says to his Son, **"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."**

One of the most comforting things that any pastor or teacher can ever hear is that God has called us. Now it is a privilege to serve the Lord and to instruct his people and to serve their needs. It's a gift I don't deserve. But you know what? We serve in a sinful world. There are lots of days when it hurts to be a pastor or a teacher. There is a price that you pay. It's worth it because we get to be spokesmen for Christ. But sometimes it's hard to see that it's worth it. That's when we need to hear that God called us. He put us where we serve and he has a plan for our work.

If that's true for guys like me, imagine what it would be like to have a ministry like Jesus had. Everywhere he went, someone attacked him. Every time he appeared in Jerusalem, the religious leaders of the day – who spent all their time trying fighting each other – put all their arguments aside and joined forces against him. After three years of preaching and teaching and doing miracles, on the day before Pentecost, the whole church in Jerusalem numbered 120 members. And for all his wonderful deeds and words, his reward was a conspiracy to inflict on him the most humiliating and painful death the world at that time knew how to give. So God said to Jesus, "I have called you. That means that all that you face is what I have sent you to face." God reminded his Son that all that hatred and opposition was part of the plan. He had to be despised and rejected by men. He had to be crucified like a common criminal. He had to suffer hell itself on the cross and die because that's what we sinners needed. If he didn't do that, not one of us would ever get to heaven. Jesus wants us there, so he willingly followed God's plan.

God told him that he would take him by the hand. How often haven't we parents held our children's hands to get them safely through a parking lot or a crowded store? How often haven't our children felt safe knowing that mom or dad was hanging on to them? God the Father promised to hold on to his Son and give him the strength his human flesh needed to get through the opposition and the pain and the dying.

God the Father reminded him that there was a purpose to all that: God promised to make his son a covenant for his people Israel. God promised Israel a new covenant of grace and forgiveness. And he promised to make Jesus a light for us gentiles who would be lost in darkness forever without him. God promised that Jesus would open eyes that are blind and that he would release prisoners from dungeons. He wasn't speaking here literally of the healings our Lord did during his life. He was talking about how Christ comes through the gospel to people of every age and sets them free from sin.

My friends, God sent Jesus to do that for us. The Father kept his promise to his Son in your life and in my life. Every one of us was born a sinner. And if we can be honest with ourselves today, we know that we sin again and again. We fail to love God with all that we are. Again and again, we do what we want to do, we revel in our selfishness and we hate anyone or anything that gets in our way. We were born lost in darkness and the sins that we still commit are shadows of that original darkness and show just how far from God we really were. Sin had us chained up in its dungeon. We could never have gotten free. We could only have spent eternity in hell. But Christ came. He died for us. He rose for us. He came in the gospel, in baptism, and he shone a light into our hearts that changed us forever. Now we have faith. Now we are God's children. Now we even strive to live for him. All that is a gift of our Savior. All that is what God sent him to do. And in his baptism God reminded his Son of all that was coming.

And by a mindboggling miracle, God gives us this glimpse into the mind and heart of the Trinity as the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit plan our salvation and put it into action. Everything that happened that day sent a message. By the power of that message, we have eternal life. Listen to God's message today. Amen.