

“Shine”

Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 2:1-12

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Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.’ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”’ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, ‘Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.’ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Isaiah 42:1-9

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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. 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: 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, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

“Shine”

Exactly 150 years ago, January 9, 1861, the Union ship *Star of the West* was fired upon from The Citadel in South Carolina. Most historians identify that fight as the official start of the civil war. Thankfully we are no longer firing live ammunition at each other in this country however we certainly are engaged in civil war, firing verbal shots and fighting on a number of fronts, politically, ethically, morally, spiritually, between denominations and even within our own denomination over a number of issues.

How do we know which side of the issue to support? How are we to engage those who see matters different than we do? How can we bring more light into the world? History, our scripture from the prophet Isaiah and Epiphany all provide some answers.

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the celebration of God's revelation to us through Jesus. Faithful Christians celebrate Epiphany differently. The Western church focuses on the coming of the magi to worship Jesus. The Eastern Church focuses on the baptism of Jesus. For both the essence is the manifestation of Christ in the world; the light of God that is dispersing darkness; the insight of God perceived that is transforming us and the world.

The prophet Isaiah describes Epiphany. God says, **Isaiah 42:1-4a** **“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. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;”** Scripture often has several layers of meaning. In this case the servant has multiple identities. Jesus is the supreme template, the master model, the perfect pattern of servant that we are to aspire, follow and learn from in order to live and do the will of God. Isaiah was also talking about servants of God past, present and future which includes big names like Abraham, Miriam, David, Mary and Paul yet also seemingly insignificant people like Ruth, Amos, the woman at the well and the boy with the loaves and fishes. Sometimes the identity of the servant is a whole group of people, a nation, church or community. The identity of the servant is also you.

All faithful servants share several key characteristics. Servants are chosen by God. Of course since God calls everyone this means anyone who hears and acts on even a part of God's call is a servant. Servants are empowered and guided by the Spirit of God to uphold the covenant, the will and love of God thereby bringing God's light to others. Servants bring forth justice. Webster dictionary defines justice as “conformity to truth, fact or reason, correctness, righteousness; the quality of being just, fair; the principle or ideal of just dealing, right action; the maintenance or administration of what is just especially by the impartial adjustment of conflicting claims.” Justice is upholding human rights and entering into healthy relationships with all people. The Bible is particularly concerned about people who are often denied justice because of their lack of power. We are to pay special attention to people who are vulnerable and in danger of being mistreated. Servants bring forth justice into the middle of human life by treating people fairly, respecting their rights and seeing every person, especially our enemies, those we disagree with, as equals, fellow precious children of God made in God's image.

It seems to me that many people today are missing how to bring forth justice. Isaiah wrote, **Isaiah 42:2-3** **“A servant will not cry or lift up their voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed the servant will not break, and a dimly burning wick the servant will not quench; the servant will faithfully bring forth justice.”** How do you interpret that? It seems to me that excludes protesting at funerals, waving signs in the street, mud slinging, grandstanding, name calling and about half the tactics we learn about every day in the news.

Bishop Quayle expounds upon the bruised reeds the servant will not break. It is like a strong man coming home in the evening and enclosing the weak, almost transparent, hands of his sick wife in his powerful hands. It is tempering one's power with humility, compassion and gentleness. Gentleness is might grown tender. God's hands that squeezed the stars into their present shape are amazingly gentle able to caress your hurt bringing forth healing. Jesus without lifting his voice is powerful enough to call the dead from the grave to glorious resurrection yet his voice can also sing a baby to sleep and speak to you through silence. When a servant touches a bruised reed hanging by its very last thread rather than hurt that reed it is healed. All of us are bruised reeds, even the person

on the other side of the issue. A true servant brings for justice quietly, gentling while at the same time healing people on both sides of the issue.

My understanding is Abraham Lincoln was this type of servant. Lincoln was a man of deep faith. He worshiped weekly, often at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, yet he did not officially join any congregation many believe so he could better relate to all faiths. Lincoln was well aware that people in both the North and South were certain that they were on God's side. Pastors and churches on both sides used scripture to support their position. Both sides prayed for God to give them victory. Lincoln said in his second Inaugural Address. "Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes God's aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes." Regarding religious warfare Lincoln said, "My concern is not whether God is on our side. My greatest concern is to be on God's side."

Sometimes it is really hard to tell which side is God's side. How does one bring justice to a complex situation? By being a servant to everyone involved in the situation. Lincoln respected the people and churches on both sides of the issue. He affirmed that both were faithful reading their Bible, praying and worshiping. He respected and listened to the people he disagreed with. He promoted and invited his most outspoken critics to serve alongside him. Lincoln did his best to serve all people. Yet at the same time he stood firm in his belief that God's side was that all people be free. The servant humbling stays involved and never gives up. Isaiah wrote, **Isaiah 42:4 "The servant will not grow faint or be crushed until the servant has established justice in the earth."**

Pastor Archibald Alexander explores the dimly burning wicks that the servant will not quench. Imagine a smoking wick. A piece of flax floating in oil, and burning so faintly that it seems a mere charred end from which the smoke coils thinly upwards. Someone comes and snuffs it out, because it smells. This is how the world's reformers behave. They snuff out the spark, trim the wick, and apply their own fire to it. Christ's way is to tend and foster the feeble spark. For example, Jesus treated the woman who anointed his feet with her tears with extraordinary gentleness. Jesus breathed on her spark of virtue and blessed it, though others present condemned her for her sins and condemned Jesus for letting her touch him. Christians are called to have the same spirit in us that was in Christ. Unafraid of being accused of approving of evil, we must look for even the tiniest spark of some inward grace in others, rejoice in it and nurture it. Our attention may make the critical difference for some life in need of Christ. One glimmering spark is enough to light a blaze. Where the flax is even smoldering, there the angels are still fighting for a soul. Our gentle service is needed to fan the flicker to a flame. Justice is not brought forth with fire that consumes and destroys those on the other side. Rather justice comes when you truly listen to your enemy to the point where you are enlightened to perceive that which is a smoldering wick within them and then you help them bring that smolder to flame.

Being a servant of God involves serving yourself. Controlling your self talk, freeing yourself from negative thoughts, feelings and activities, finding ways to encourage yourself, taking time to engage in activities that fan your smoldering passion into flame. Servant hood is admitting that you are a bruised reed in many ways and seeking healing. Servant hood is treating yourself with justice. You are specially gifted to bless others with the particular special gifts and talents God has given you. Each of us has a unique facet of Epiphany, a unique light to shine into the world.

Being a servant is a daunting task. Fortunately God promises to help us every step of the way. God says. **Isaiah 42:6-7 "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, to open the**

eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” God does much more than merely call you to be God’s servant. God fills servants with righteousness, empowers you and takes you by the hand assisting you with every task. God fills servants with light so you can embody God’s love and shine. You are to shine to bring Epiphany, light, sight, freedom to all people. As many have said, “I’d rather see a sermon than hear one.” Jesus modeled servant hood. Jesus refused to be a vocal political activist. Jesus didn’t even speak to the charges leveled at him during his trial. Jesus changed the world by serving others. Each of us is to follow Jesus’ example with modest, quiet, considerate and compassionate service. We are to sit with the brokenhearted and never be discouraged or dismayed from the task of bringing justice, equal treatment, for everyone.

How do you know if you are on God’s side? You are on God’s side if you are bringing forth God’s justice, if you are bringing more light to the issue, if you are helping people see new ways of living in true community, if you are liberating all who are trapped in any way, if the way you are serving is the most loving. You are on God’s side if your service is quiet, humble and shows compassion and respect for all people. Constantly seek God’s will. Your greatest concern should always be to be on God’s side. Pastor Eugene Peterson wrote, “The world does not need more of you; the world needs more of God. Your friends do not need more of you; they need more of God. And you don’t need more of you; you need more of God.” Servants serve God and not their own desires whenever those desires differ. God’s servants do not fuel civil wars rather God’s servants are civil and serving. You are on God’s side if God can say about you. **Isaiah 42:select verses “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon you; you will bring forth justice to the nations. You will not cry or lift up your voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed you will not break, and a dimly burning wick you will not quench; you will faithfully bring forth justice. You will not grow faint or be crushed until you have established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for your teaching. I, the Lord, 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, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.”** Amen