

Claimed As God's Own 2023
Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Matthew 3:13-17

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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.

Matthew 3:13-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

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

I was surprised by something I read on the Internet this week,
that the TV game show "The Weakest Link" is still on the air,
and in fact different versions are popular all over the world.

In "The Weakest Link" teams compete by answering trivia questions.
For correct answers money is added to the team's score.
If their answer is incorrect then money is taken away,
and they are humiliated with petty sarcasm & insult.

And after each round, someone is voted off by the other contestants,
then embarrassed even more by the host or hostess who declares:
"you are the weakest link ... goodbye"
as the camera follows their 'walk of shame'.
It mystifies me that anyone would sign-up for such abuse.

That TV show reflects the way our world & culture judges & operates.
Successful winners are celebrated and those who fail are rejected.

The good news is that the Lord our God does not operate that way.
God never rejects us, even when damaged, broken or mistaken,
nor does Jesus set us aside when we struggle, mess up or fail.

The passage from Isaiah is about the gracious compassion of the Lord,
and reveals the amazing depth & breadth of God's love for each of us.

Isaiah was writing about what God would do for the weakened and weary,
through the life, ministry and mission of the servant he's sending,
who stands in stark contrast to the ways of this world, vs. 1-3

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.

a bruised reed and a dimly burning wick are parallel images that represent God's compassion toward the weak, the vulnerable, wounded & broken.

a bruised reed he will not break

refers to the reeds that grow in marshes in the wetlands,
that are very easily damaged and crushed if stepped on.

These reeds were often used as quill pens for writing on parchment,
very cheap and easy to make, and when the tips wore out,
they would be quickly cast aside as useless and worthless.

The promise is that God's servant will not break the bruised reed,
for God does not reject the vulnerable, the broken or hurting...
... and God never casts us aside as worthless or useless.

The other illustration is, 'a dimly burning wick he will not quench'
Ancient lamps were little clay pots with a hole up the spout
with a flax wick running from the oil out through the hole.

Normally, when you'd replenish such a lamp with more oil,
you would also replace the burned out wick with a new one.

Since a flax wick was fragile and very cheap,
it was easier to replace than to trim and restore the old one.

But God doesn't reject those folks who have issues and problems,
or those who are still struggling and wounded, or difficult,
or those who don't have it all together & figured out right now.
God doesn't even replace those who fail to live up to expectations.

Now that is not exactly the image of God that I grew up believing.
Since God is omniscient and knows everything that I've ever done,
I've always assumed God must be terribly disappointed with me
because I'm far less faithful and obedient than I should be.

But clearly from God's perspective, God's intention and purpose,
**there is way more to our worthiness as those created by God,
than just our successes, our wins, accomplishments & victories,
or any of the other ways the world determines our value & worth.**

Therefore, as God promises through Isaiah, vs. 1, 6-7

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. 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.

That passage certainly fits the life and ministry of Jesus Christ,

and what he came to demonstrate, teach and accomplish,
by **inviting all** to receive God's grace and salvation.

The ministry of Jesus was always about reaching out with God's grace
toward the lost and outcast, and to those the world would reject,
such as unworthy lepers, the lame, the blind & tax collectors.

The Good News is that God never, not ever abandons or gives up on us...
... and that's the wonderful message of grace that Jesus proclaimed.

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus came as had been long promised
into a cruel and violent world with a message of hope and promise,
a new vision of God's cleansing, healing and saving purpose
with power and truth that can overcome defeat and despair.

All four of the gospels make it a point to tell about John the Baptist
by the Jordan river preparing the way for the coming of Christ.
**John's message was primarily a stark warning about
God's coming wrath and harsh judgment, vs. 10 & 12**

Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good
fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his
threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable
fire.

In response to the fear and dread of that coming divine judgment,
John preached repentance and changing one's direction in life
away from human sin, corruption, evil and moral complacency.

The baptism practiced by John was about personal repentance,
a symbol, a visible sign of repenting and the washing away of sin,
but with Jesus, baptism will take on a new meaning.

Jesus will redefine the baptism of repentance as practiced by John.
Jesus was sinless, the only one who ever fully obeyed the Lord God.
So he had no need for repentance or any cleansing by baptism.

According to Matthew's gospel, John objected to baptizing Jesus,
by saying that it would be more appropriate for Jesus to baptize him, but the Lord
Jesus was insistent and explained, vs. 15
... it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.

Generally, we think of "righteousness" as doing the right thing,
but here it's full and theological meaning goes a little deeper.
In this case, righteousness refers to fulfilling the obligations
that result from having a right and obedient relationship with God.

Christian righteousness is responding to the revealed will of God,
by doing what it is that God requires and wants from us,
because we value that relationship and want it to thrive.
It's the process of growing into God's grace & call to discipleship.

What that means, is that Jesus submitted to baptism in obedience,

embracing his future, the Father's plan and purpose for sending him,
and it was commissioning Jesus to begin his public ministry.

For Jesus, "to fulfill all righteousness"
was to obey & fulfill the purpose of his coming, for our redemption.

His baptism began the mission he completed on the cross,
signifying that the coming kingdom of God was arriving,
a journey and process for the redemption of humankind,
and it became with Jesus a sign of God's gracious love.

**So for us to fulfill righteousness is to do as God requires us,
and that is why the baptism of Jesus matters to us.**

When we as Christians are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ,
it is a sign of God's love and grace, healing and saving purpose,
so that in Christ, we are the beloved children of the Lord,
and our beginning to live & grow into that relationship.

**For Presbyterians,
baptism is a window through which the grace of God is revealed,**
as through that grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit,
we can live useful, and meaningful, and faithful lives.

The message we are called by God to live, to reflect and make known,
and the wonderful truth that Christians are called to proclaim:
is that God loves us, and continues to love us always,
regardless of our sins, or our mistakes and failures.

Through Jesus, baptism has now been given a new purpose and meaning,
as a sign that God loves us enough to become one with us, vs. 16-17

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.
And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

The phrase, the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him,
looks ahead to when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples
as tongues of fire giving them power to speak at Pentecost.
The baptism of Jesus looks ahead to the ministry & mission of the Church.

Through his baptism, Jesus began the work of hope and salvation,
as a sign of God declaring to us that **we are** God's children,
that **we are** the beloved, with whom God is also well pleased,
not because of what we've done, but by what God has done for us.

Baptism is a statement and reminder
that wherever we go, whatever we do or is done to us,
God continues to love us, to welcome us and hold onto us.

In our harsh & angry world, and our damaged - destructive culture
that tells us we're nobodies whose lives don't really matter,
the sacraments of both baptism and Communion

point as signs toward God's declaration and assurance
that we are indeed God's precious children,
blessed by grace and filled with the Holy Spirit.

And that the same grace that is signified by baptism,
the powerful, unfathomable, wonderful mystery of God's love
is also the same gracious invitation to the Lord's Table,
a family meal, a banquet for the beloved people of God.

Both baptism and Communion are visible promise, hope and symbol
of God's healing and saving grace through which God claims us
and empowers us with the Spirit to do as the Lord requires of us.

Surely sharing Communion at the Lord's Table of grace and love,
is an ideal opportunity for us to reflect and examine ourselves,
our lives, our attitudes, values, hopes, words and deeds,
and especially, our walk with our God right now ...

... and ask ourselves,
what does it mean **that God chose to love and bless each of us?**