

Sermon: The Beloved

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

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Based on **Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17**

Isaiah and Matthew are writing in different times and places from each other. With Isaiah, there's a big buildup with the Exile and everything, but Matthew, unlike Luke, never really explains why he is writing; he just launches into the story. But each of them seems to have a clear-eyed view of who they are talking about and when we look at them together, they might be talking about the same person.

So, on the occasion of Jesus' baptism, maybe we could use some context. Which servant? Why baptism? And how does Jesus' baptism fulfill all righteousness?

Years ago, when I was the Saturday chaplain at New England Baptist, two nurses approached me to tell me they had a problem with the word *righteousness*. For them, a righteous man was one who put himself above others in a morally superior way. It was offensive to them. I said, wait a minute – that's not what it means. So, we talked about it for a little while, and they heard me. They may have walked away with a new understanding, but their minds remained made up.

The concept of righteousness does have a moral quality, but there's more to it than that. At home, I have *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. It's a very thick volume. The entry for *Righteousness* says, 'See Justice.' Justice is something that matters a great deal to Matthew. Righteousness is the whole purpose of God for humanity. It's about our behavior and of how we fulfill Scripture and the demands made on us by God. It's about how we live into the covenant. And it's about how we love God and neighbor.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6). We want to hunger and thirst for justice.

Baptism should always be a public event, as it was in the first century and as it is in most Christian churches today. John seemed surprised when Jesus walked up to him and asked to be baptized. John said, "Are you kidding me? Who am I to baptize you?" Jesus had no need to repent so why did he want John's baptism?

Jesus' baptism was a way to show how the incarnate Word of God identified with the people even though he himself was sinless.

Imagine if Jesus had said, "I don't need that, but *you* do." That's not how you win hearts and minds. How could he engage in his ministry if he himself was separated from the people in this way? So, Jesus' baptism connected God with humanity.

And to prove it, a voice from heaven gave a public declaration of approval of Jesus and his ministry, and then off he went, straight to the wilderness for testing.

Now, in the Isaiah reading, that was God speaking. If we read just that passage, we could reasonably be expected to ask, who is the servant?

But we don't just read one passage and come to a conclusion; we have to read for context, so we go back a chapter or two to see what else is going on. And there at the beginning of chapter 41, God said:

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend; you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, "*You are my servant*, I have chosen you and not cast you off"; *do not fear*, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God (41:8-10a).

It turns out that, for Isaiah, 'the servant' was Israel – the entire nation. That may have ramifications for us as a church in how we hear God's words in today's reading. A bigger, related question might be, how would Jesus have heard these words?

Christians see Isaiah's prophecies fulfilled in the work and ministry of Jesus – and even Jesus thought so. Luke tells us he read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

'The Spirit of the LORD is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor.'

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. Then he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21).

Based on that, for Christians, the LORD'S servant is found in the person of Jesus and in his ministry.

If righteousness equals justice and doing the will of God, then the world as a whole is far from all the things promised in Isaiah, and Jesus' ministry is not yet completed. Instead, the world is just a collection of troubled nations each with its own problems.

We get in our own way, for whatever reason. We have trouble recognizing how God might be at work in the world. Divided politics here and abroad; aggressors making war on their neighbors; poverty and hunger in one place, abundance in another – even if we'd never heard of Jesus of Nazareth, how do we let these things persist?

Today's passage from Isaiah is a vision of divine leadership guided by mercy and a desire for justice. Can anyone else, anyone other than Jesus, do the servant's work? Can we free all of humanity from its current fallen condition, from its blindness and addiction to sin, on our own?

We have a crying need for divine leadership, mercy, and justice.

Earlier, we talked about how Jesus' baptism connected God with humanity. Before that, we said that Matthew seemed to have a clear-eyed view of who he was talking about; quite obviously, it was Jesus. But who, for Matthew, was Jesus?

For Matthew, Jesus was Emmanuel, meaning 'God is with us.' So, when Matthew talks about Jesus and his ministry, he's really talking about what God is doing. And when Jesus talks about fulfilling all righteousness, he expects this from his followers too.

The good news is, we're fully equipped to help build God's kingdom. Jesus wouldn't ask of us anything he himself wouldn't do. All he's asking is that we love the LORD our God with all our hearts, souls, and minds; and our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40).

By God's grace, we can all do that.

Amen.