

December 16, 2018  
The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 42:1-9

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>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.  
<sup>2</sup>He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
<sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth **justice**.  
<sup>4</sup>He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established **justice** in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.  
<sup>5</sup>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:  
<sup>6</sup>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,  
<sup>7</sup>to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.  
<sup>8</sup>I AM THE LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols.  
<sup>9</sup>See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.

Isaiah is perhaps the most famous and important of the Hebrew prophets. He spoke and wrote during the times of the ascension of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires which defeated the recently divided state of Israel, which through a disastrous civil war had divided the nation into the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

Isaiah speaks to the people as they are exiled in Babylon, encouraging them to recognize what they can and cannot control. Babylon has won. They lost. They are now foreigners, exiled to a strange land. Now there, they can seek the common good of their new home, working and living in such a way as to testify to their faith.

In that great loss Isaiah (particularly chapters 40-55) speak of a great hope. This is done less as a magical foreseeing the future than as a poetic unveiling of the world as it appears to be and the world according to what God is doing in and through it.

This portion of hopeful words includes the Servant songs (also called the Servant poems or the Songs of the Suffering Servant) which are four songs in the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible, which include Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-7; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12. They were first identified by Bernhard Duhm in his 1892 commentary on Isaiah. The songs are four poems written about a certain "servant of YHWH." God calls the servant to lead the nations, but the servant is horribly abused among them. In the end, he is rewarded.

**justice:** מִשְׁפָּט [miš·pāṭ]: justice, judgement. This is the poetic juxtaposition that Isaiah makes – the people see one judgment – that Babylon and her ways have won – whereas the Servant of the Lord will bring forth and execute a different justice rooted not in military victory or national might, but in the creative righteousness and covenantal love of the LORD.

This section of Isaiah can be heard among the following scriptures which seem to borrow its language and metaphors: Isaiah 61:1-11; Luke 4:16-30 and Luke 7:18-23.

## Luke 3:7-18

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<sup>7</sup> John [called the Baptizer] said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

<sup>8</sup> Bear fruits worthy of **repentance**. Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>9</sup> 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.”

<sup>10</sup> And the crowds asked him, “What then should we do?” <sup>11</sup> In reply he said to them, “Whoever has *two coats* must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” <sup>12</sup> EVEN TAX COLLECTORS came to be **baptized**, and they asked him, “Teacher, what should we do?” <sup>13</sup> He said to them, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” <sup>14</sup> Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what should we do?” He said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages.”

<sup>15</sup> As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What shimmers in your attention to these readings?**
- **How do you recognize something as “of God”?**
- **Do you wait for God to act implicitly or explicitly in the world, directly or through others?**
- **How is the Christmas Story one we are to retell with both the text and in the open book of our lives?**

**repentance**: the word in Greek is *metanoia*: it means to turn around, to make a 180 degree turn switching completely the direction in which one is traveling. John is thus telling the people that they’re not just wrong, but going in the completely wrong direction. He disrupts their movement (lives) to invite them to something radically different.

*two coats*: Roman soldiers had the right to demand that residents of the Empire help them by caring their backpack for a certain distance (around a mile). We think of a large jacket, but here the word is a **chitón** - a tunic (under-garment) worn next to the skin. What John is asking isn’t something that would kill you to give up, but rather saying that you don’t need 2 pairs of long underwear, so share one with another person who has none so that they might be warm.

EVEN TAX COLLECTORS: These were the worst of the worst of sinners – they were collaborators, as they worked with the Roman Empire to collect the foreign taxes from their compatriots and neighbors. It’s understood that they made their income by charging whatever else they wanted (on top of the regular tax) and demanding it from their neighbors.

**baptized**: we see that baptism was something that existed before Jesus – John is doing it! It was a ritual washing, which was practiced among the Jews of the time of Jesus, in particular among those called the Essenes who lived near the Dead Sea and who wrote the “Dead Sea Scrolls”.