

A Light to the Nations
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First Lesson: Isaiah 42:1-9

¹ 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.

² He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;

³ a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

⁴ He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵ 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:

⁶ 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,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸ I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Second Lesson: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented. ¹⁶And 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. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Today, as you’ve noticed, the baptismal font is front and center. I want to take away the mystery before any begins. No one will be baptized today ... but we will be ordaining and installing deacons and

elders. In their ordination and installation, we will be remembering their baptisms in the vows they will make to serve the church. And, in this day, too, we are remembering the baptism of Christ.

I know that, if asked, you could explain to someone that, in baptism, we welcome people as members of the church and make promises to support them as they grow in faith and even that, through baptism, we understand ourselves cleansed of sin. Today, on this day when baptism is so central, both literally and figuratively, I'd like to offer even more language around baptism, some of which you probably have tucked away in your memory and maybe a little something new. We've already read from our best and primary resource for understanding baptism, the Bible. We have another resource, too, which helps us put together our understandings from the Bible – the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The Book of Order is always interpreted through the lens of the Bible and its authority is always second to the Bible. In it both our forebearers and our peers have sought and seek to put into words an understanding of how we live faithfully as followers of Christ and students of the Bible. About baptism much has been written, both to help make it clear what baptism is and what it is not. Our understanding of our own baptisms can only be named through an understanding of Christ's baptism and so we read in the Book of Order: "Jesus through his own baptism identified himself with sinners in order to fulfill all righteousness. Jesus in his own baptism was attested Son by the Father and was anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection."¹ So, you may ask, what does that say about our baptisms? The Book of Order continues: "Jesus the risen Lord assured his followers of his continuing presence and power and commissioned them"² – you remember, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age." The Book of Order explains what that meant for the disciples, and thus for us, saying: "The disciples were empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit to undertake a life of service and to be an inclusive worshiping community, sharing life in which love, justice, and mercy abounded."³

For us, as part of the Reformed tradition of faith, we explain such empowering and living of our faith in this way: "Sacraments are signs of the real presence and power of Christ in the Church, symbols of God's action. Through the Sacraments, God seals believers in redemption, renews their identity as the people of God, and marks them for service."⁴ Being marked for service, being called to share life in

¹ W-2.3001 Jesus and Baptism.

² Ibid.

³ W-2.3001 Jesus and Baptism.

⁴ W-1.3033(2) Reformed Tradition; Sacraments.

which love, justice, and mercy abound – these are what we remember and reaffirm in the ordination and installation of deacons and elders. Baptism isn't an end but most definitely a beginning. We see this in our reading from Matthew – Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry and so it is with us. And so, each time we set out on an endeavor of ministry, we are reminded of our baptisms.

Another way this can be said is found again in the Book of Order: “Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God’s redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.”⁵ We hear echoes of our reading from Isaiah here.

Gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world ... 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. This reading from Isaiah is one of four in Isaiah known as the Servant Songs. Much debate has been had over who the servant is. We, as Christians, hear Christ’s life spoken in these words and, indeed, Christ referred back to a Servant Song when he stood in the temple and said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”⁶

As much as we trust that Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of a messiah, Isaiah didn't know Christ. Isaiah was pointing to a more immediate hope for the people. Last week we read from a later Isaiah, written to a people released from exile. Today's Isaiah reading is written to those people as they are in exile; we've stepped further back in time. God is speaking to the people – some believe about a specific person, perhaps Cyrus, the Persian king who would release them from exile, and some believe God is speaking to the people about themselves. Israel as God's servant. One of the Servant Songs of Isaiah actually names Israel as the servant. If we were reading for historical purposes, who the servant was would matter. But that's not why we read the Bible. We read it to better understand our relationship with God, to understand how we can faithfully respond to the grace God offers to us. Whoever this servant was, in right relationship with God, we can be the servant, too. We can be a light to the nations, open the eyes that are blind, bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

As members of the church, made so through our baptism, we name the ways in which we can be that light to the nations. The Book of Order says this about membership:

Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's

⁵ W-2.3006 Baptism: Grace, Repentance, Commissioning.

⁶ Luke 4:21.

love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed, ...
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life, ...
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment ...⁷

The list of involvement is much longer than what I've read, and I would encourage you to check out the whole list,⁸ but know that all point to ways to be a light to the nations. We are all the servants of God, following in the example of the servant of Christ who began his ministry with baptism, just as we are called to do. To us all God says, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon you."

Let us pray: Lord, make us each and all a light to the nations. Amen.

⁷ G-1.0304 The Ministry of Members.

⁸ Membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is a joy and a privilege. It is also a commitment to participate in Christ's mission. A faithful member bears witness to God's love and grace and promises to be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's Church. Such involvement includes:

- proclaiming the good news in word and deed,
- taking part in the common life and worship of a congregation,
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern, and active support,
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life,
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents,
- demonstrating a new quality of life within and through the church,
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others,
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life,
- working in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment,
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, and reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of one's membership, and considering ways in which one's participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful.