

## NEW THINGS I NOW DECLARE

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ISAIAH 42:1-9 (NRSV) 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.

This announcement is made to Jews in Babylonian exile. It's the first of several "Servant Songs" in Isaiah—some say there are four; others say five, or even seven. I'll not engage in that debate here. The most frequent response to these Servant Songs is a question: "Who is the servant?"

Early Jewish scholarship held that the servant was Israel. But in the period following Babylonian exile a teaching emerged about a Messiah—a person who would lead Israel to overthrow their oppressor nations and restore the kingdom of David. By the time of Jesus, that teaching was central to Judaism.

Virtually all Christian scholars agree that Jesus of Nazareth somehow is related to these Servant Songs.

The most conservative application is that these songs predict the advent of Jesus, and that Jesus was born, essentially, with no choice but to fulfill them.

Moderate and progressive scholars suggest these songs apply to any person or group or nation or church whose service to God fits their pattern. Jesus wasn't the only one to fulfill the prophecy; but his fulfillment was uniquely complete and total.

I am among that second group; furthermore, I believe Jesus consciously chose these Servant Songs as the model for fulfilling his own calling and ministry. Today's Gospel reading is the baptism of Jesus, and immediately following his baptism Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he confronted temptations of three alternative ways to fulfill his calling and ministry:

1. The model of relevance—meet people's needs: "Turn these stones into bread."
2. The model of Charismatic Self-Promotion: "Jump from the top of the Temple and let the angels carry you to the ground! People will follow you blindly!"
3. The model of the Opportunistic Power-Grabber: "I'll give you all the kingdoms

of the world if you'll worship me!"

Jesus chose, instead, Isaiah's model of Servant. Why? Because that most accurately reflects the nature and identity of God.

There is some evidence that, prior to his baptism, Jesus spent time in the Qumran community in southern Israel—where the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947. The scrolls offer a variety of translations of Isaiah's writings, some of which are inconsistent with the teaching of first century mainstream Judaism. Jesus' life and ministry more closely resembles some of the Qumran versions than the traditional interpretation of the scribes and priests and scholars.

For Isaiah, the identity of the servant is less important than the work God enables the servant to accomplish. Remember, this part of Isaiah is an announcement to Jews in exile in Babylon.

There is in North America a large and growing population who call themselves, "spiritual but not religious." In some ways I identify with their distinctions, and think they have something important to say to organized religion. And I think what they have to say has to do with the definition of "spiritual."

Isaiah begins: "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."

The spirit of God equips the Servant to do what the world regards as impossible, namely, to "bring justice:" to make available a world of equitable, trusting life-giving social relations. Spirituality includes an advocacy for justice; moreover, the work of Justice is the work of God's Servant.

But, while the work of justice done by the Servant is deeply conflicted and high-risk, the Servant doesn't proceed with force or high-handed authority. The Servant "will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street..." The image in these words is of power and authority: one who shouts commands in public places.

God's justice is wrought gently, carefully, caringly. The Servant is so gentle that "...<sup>3</sup>a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..." That is, the Servant has respect for persons who are weak, fragile, and in jeopardy. His way of bringing justices matches the goal of the justice he enacts. The means serve the end.

Our NRSV renders verse 4, "He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth..." In the original language, and typical of Hebrew poetry, this phrase actually echoes the key words from the metaphor in verse 3; thus, it reads, "He will not 'burn dimly', he will not 'be bruised'." He will honor the weak; but he will be strong to do his work of justice.

And then in verse 5, the Lord addresses the Servant directly to say, "I am

the once who breathed life into creation, just as I am giving breath (ruah, breath, spirit, wind) to you." The same power at work in creation is now at work in the mission of the servant. The purpose of the Servant is the same as the purpose of God, and (as we pointed out last Sunday) that purpose has been intended since the beginning of creation. God is asserting power to reorder creation from injustice to justice, from inequity to equity, from oppression to freedom.

And what emerges when the Servant is truly "spiritual," that is, when he acts in the Spirit of God, is newness: "...? See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare..."

It's significant that the Bible closes on a scene in which God declares, "See, I am always making all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

Remember: these words are announced to exiles. It is a word, a vision, an act that exiles were too bruised and dimmed to imagine. We can identify. With the coming of social media we are exposed constantly to the vulnerability of youth and women, to the hopelessness of stress and depression and poverty. We almost daily are pounded with news about violence and terrorism.

But in that context "spiritual" doesn't mean "sending thoughts and prayers." "Spiritual" doesn't mean waiting for God to act—to make everything right. God already has acted—and continues to act: God has "put (God's) spirit upon God's servant. And he, or she, or we who acknowledge receipt of that spirit and live in its strength, "will bring forth justice to the nations." And that's what it truly means to be "spiritual."