

Isaiah 42:1-9

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.

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: 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. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 12:15-21

When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many crowds followed him, and he cured all of them, and he ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: “Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory. And in his name the Gentiles will hope.”

Let me tell you a story. A story of the end of the world as people know it, and a story of blessings.

Not long after the Great Flood, Noah’s descendants get together and build a city. They build a huge tower in the middle of this city, so high that they planned for the top to reach the heavens. They plan to build this city so great that they have no need for God, or so they think.

God confuses the languages of the people and scatters them across the Earth. The city that they built and abandoned becomes known as Babel, and the tower, the Tower of Babel.¹

This is the end of the world as they know it.

¹ Genesis 11.

But God chooses a couple, Abram and Sarai, and blesses them so that they and their descendants will be a blessing to every people on Earth.² They are blessed beyond what they need, but that blessing is not intended to serve just their own needs. God tells them to bless every people on Earth.

Abraham and Sarah's descendants enjoy God's blessings. They love their wealth and their many children and grandchildren. But they don't really go out of their way to help anybody else.

Their descendants experience the end of the world as they know it. It's a terrible famine. They travel all the way into Egypt in search of food. This is the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors.

Then, after a while, God leads God's people out of Egypt. Moses. The parting of the sea. The whole Exodus story.

Moses tells God's people that God has blessed them. That, if they obey God's voice and keep the covenant, that they will be God's most treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.³ To be a priest is a blessing, but it requires that you serve needs beyond your own, before your own. You serve God and you serve the people. Yes, these people will be greatly blessed, but the purpose of that blessing is to allow them to serve all the rest of the nations of the Earth.

The people accept the first part of that statement, but not the rest. They accept God's blessings. They accept the land that God gives them. They accept their military successes against enemies far stronger than they are. They accept their prosperity.

² Genesis 12-23.

³ Exodus 19:5-6.

But they don't accept the rest. The people and even the kings, who are supposed to lead the people in living godly lives, don't serve others. They serve their own needs and wants and lusts. They steal from their neighbors and oppress the weak, and they rationalize it as "just business." They ignore the needy among them. They make sacrifices to Baal, the idol of their neighbors, and then turn around to worship God. David rapes Bathsheba. The Hebrew people certainly do not serve as any kind of faithful priestly kingdom, or even a good example to the rest of the world.

These people experience the end of the world as they know it.

The kingdom of Judah is conquered by the mighty Babylonian Empire. The Temple that Solomon built is destroyed, along with the rest of the great city of Jerusalem. And the people are taken back against their will to the city of Babylon, where they are desperately poor foreigners who don't speak the language or share the local culture. This is the same Babylonian exile as Daniel and the fiery furnace, and King Nebuchadnezzar.⁴

Isaiah is a trauma survivor, talking to a bunch of other trauma survivors. He describes God's servant, the one in whom God delights. God has put his spirit upon him. This servant has been blessed with strength from God. He is strong, strong enough that he can be soft-spoken. Unlike the more typical rulers of the Earth, he doesn't have to yell or raise his voice. He is strong enough that he can be gentle. So gentle that he won't break a bruised reed or snuff out a barely-burning candle.

He has been given as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open blind eyes and to free prisoners. He will gather God's scattered people together like a shepherd and bring them back where they belong.

⁴ See the Book of Daniel, particularly chapter 3.

Later Isaiah says, “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”⁵ This servant of God will gather God’s people and restore them, but that is not enough for God. He will establish justice for all the nations. Not just for the Hebrew people, but for the whole world.

(We Christians believe that we know who this servant is, but hold on. That’s the right answer, but not yet. This passage works on two levels.)

The Hebrew people understood, and continue to understand, this passage, as referring to the Hebrew people as a whole.⁶ They have been conquered and humiliated, but they are soon to be exalted. They are soon to be restored to Zion and become their own kingdom again. Isaiah tells them that, and he explains why God is doing it.

It would be so easy to respond to their situation by developing an exaggerated sense of group identity and a passionate hostility to outsiders, like so many groups have done in the past, both before and since.

But, once again, the traumatized people of God are called not to do the easy, human thing of “circling the wagons.” Once again, they are told that, “It’s not about you, Skippy!” Once again, they are told that is not enough to use God’s blessings to take care of their own and their own needs. They are being restored and blessed so that they can be a priestly people, serving God and humanity. All of humanity.

⁵ Isaiah 49:6.

⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Cambridge Press, book 1, chapter 55, page 50. *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* on this passage.

Once again, they don't do it. They take care of themselves and themselves alone. They oppress foreigners in their lands and worship idols right alongside with God. They place their faith in military might and in diplomatic deals, rather than in God.

They experience the end of the world as they know it. First, they are conquered by Alexander the Great, and then, following Alexander's death, by the Roman Empire. This is the context in which our Gospels start. You remember, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed."⁷

The Hebrew people have been left in their own land this time, but they are an occupied people, obeying the commands of Roman overlords.

God sends one more prophet to the Hebrew people, a voice crying in the wilderness to call them back to obedience to God's covenant. John tells the people to, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" But God knows that John will not be entirely successful. Before John is even born, God has decided that God will do a new thing.

I picture God as being kind of exasperated here. God is done with this whole thing of sending a spokesperson to tell God's people what God wants them to do and to be. It isn't working. So, God comes into the world Godself to show us what it is to be God's people.

That is what we're preparing to celebrate on Christmas Day. God loved us so much that God did not give up on humanity as not being worth the trouble. God loved the whole world so much that God did not just keep sending spokespeople to tell people that God's blessings were for the whole world. No, God came into the world to show us.

The Word became flesh and lived among us. Born in animal space, Jesus came to rule over all civilization. Helpless as an infant, he showed the power of God's love. He taught God's

⁷ Luke 2:1.

story and God's covenant to anyone who would listen. He taught them that strict adherence to every jot and tittle of the law was not enough. That taking care of "our people" was not enough. He taught them that God meant those commands to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."⁸ He taught his followers that they were the light of the world. Not the light of the nation. The light of the world.

Jesus healed the sick, and welcomed sinners and outcasts. He shared our pain, and then he showed us that "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."⁹ That is how much God loves us, my sisters and brothers. God then raised Jesus from the dead, conquering death itself, for us.

Four times the Hebrew people saw the end of the world as they knew it. Four times they were restored and greatly blessed. Four times they were told that the blessings that God had given them were not for them alone, but were given through them for the benefit of all of humanity. The last time, God gave up on telling us. God came down here and showed us.

As Christians, we are grafted onto the family tree of the Hebrew people, adopted into the family of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. This is our family history. The story of our God and God's people.

We have been blessed, far beyond our own needs.

Let those who have ears, listen.

AMEN

⁸ Luke 10:27.

⁹ John 15:13.