

# Baptism of Our Lord

## THE SERVANT WHO SERVES

Isaiah 42:1-9 (*cf. Matthew 12:15-21*)

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## Analysis by Ronald C. Neustadt

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. 2He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. 4He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

5Thus 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: 6I 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, 7to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. 8I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. 9See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Out of Service

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *No Light*

The LED sign in the parking lot of my neighborhood Dairy Queen flashed “Making Spirits Bright!” in December. I thought, “Now there’s some brightness I could go for!” (And I did.)

Don’t we all? Go for something that gives us pleasure, I mean. Of course, the pleasure doesn’t last. It may not even be all that good for us. But our problem is that, too often, we act as if the brightness of it is the only light that matters. (By “brightness,” of course, we’re not talking about pleasure in just the physical sense of the word. It could be financial security, power, prestige-you name it.) We go after it even when it’s at the expense of other people. The result is injustice and oppression-exactly what prophets throughout the ages have been killed for speaking against.

The brightness did not last for Israel. They were in exile for having craved brightness rather than being a light for the nations. They had craved power and security and prosperity (for some). To get it they were willing to ignore the weak and the cries of the hungry.

Israel had been chosen to be God’s servant. A real servant of God would have brought God’s light into the world rather than craving worldly brightness. A real servant would have let the world see God’s justice and God’s mercy.

It’s hard to claim that we are any better servants than was Israel. Our lives give us away. Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (a verse quoted at baptisms today), but sometimes that light gets pretty dim.

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *No Spirit*

There's a bigger problem, though, and that is what lies behind our failure to be a "light for the nations." Our bigger problem is that by nature we don't have the *spirit* of a servant in us. We are not by nature people who are willing to do whatever it takes to bring life to others. The spirit we are born with is more self-serving than that. It is a spirit that is willing for us to serve others when it "makes us feel so good," but it is not a spirit that urges us to go much beyond that. When that's the spirit that animates us, how can we be servants that are "light for the nations"? Without the spirit of the Lord in us, we just don't have it in us to be that kind of servant.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Life***

Worst of all, without the spirit of the Lord in us, we cannot survive. The one "who created the heavens and spread out the earth . . . and who gives breath to the people upon the earth" (v. 5) requires righteousness of us. The future belongs to God's servants who operate with the spirit of the Lord. And that spirit is the spirit of a servant who "establishes justice in the earth" (v. 5) and who opens people's eyes to the mercy of God.

There is no future in trying to live by some other spirit. There is no future in being self-serving. But how can anyone give himself or herself a new spirit? When you're in prison, someone else has to unlock the door. When you're in exile, you need someone else to set you free.

## **PROGNOSIS: Service Restored**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Life Freely Given***

Isaiah (or, the one who writes in Isaiah's name, if you prefer) announced to the people of Israel who were sitting in exile that God was setting them free. God would put God's spirit on them so they could live as the servants God had chosen them to be. They were being freed so they could bring freedom to others.

In the end, it would take more than that to get the job done. A lot more. In fact, in the end it would cost God God's own life. Nevertheless, God was not deterred by the cost. God chose to become the servant that was needed to get the job done. God was determined to do whatever it took to "save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). So God comes to earth to be "with us." And not just with us as in "among us," but with us in order to bring us the light we need in order to live.

Jesus' baptism makes it clear. When he was baptized, Matthew tells us, Jesus "saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him" (Matt. 3:16) The Spirit of the Lord is what animated him. It animated him to forgive and to cast out demons and to heal, Sabbath or not. It animated him to show mercy to bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks like us who have this deadly habit of settling for brightness rather than light. His insistence on showing mercy (forgiving, healing and receiving all, regardless of merit) ended up costing him his life.

And when he does show this mercy to us, the Father makes it clear that he is "well-pleased" with this Beloved Son.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *New Spirit***

When God gets it across to us that our exile is over-that there is forgiveness for the love affairs we've had with brightness, and that we have a future because of God's determination to follow through on God's promises to us-that's when we find ourselves beginning to live with a new spirit, the spirit of a servant. The old spirit keeps coming back, of course. But YHWH does not give YHWH's glory to another, nor does YHWH surrender YHWH's praise to idols (v. 8). Instead, God keeps reminding us of the promise God makes to us in Jesus. God keeps sending other servants to remind us of the promise made to us in our own baptisms. And in the process God puts God's Spirit upon us.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Glowing***

It's that Spirit that makes us glow. It's that Spirit that urges us on to "bring forth justice to the nations" and to open eyes that are blind and to bring prisoners out from dungeons so that they, too, can live in freedom and see the goodness of the Lord and know that they have a future.

When the Spirit who descended upon Jesus animates us, that's what happens. We live as servants. We bring God's own light into this dark world. We tell of God's faithfulness in Jesus. We offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. We work for justice and an end to oppression. And God gets glorified.