

Baptism of Our Lord

NEW THINGS I NOW DECLARE

Isaiah 42:1-9

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Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

1Here 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.

DIAGNOSIS: The Former Things

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *No Justice*

Chapter 42 of Isaiah was addressed to people in a situation in

which it would not be hard to find ourselves at some point. (Sadly, the dynamics of the situation have stayed the same, although the peoples involved have changed over the centuries.) Isaiah's own people had been defeated in war and they were now exiles or refugees, subject to the reigning power of the Babylonian empire. The Babylonians attributed their success to the protection of their gods, who were clearly superior to the gods of the conquered peoples. We still say, "Might makes right," and we believe it, too, just as they did—victors and victims alike. For what kind of God lets his people lose and be destroyed? How can a humiliated people ensure their survival except through subservience to the ones wielding power? What is a conquering people to do but impose their system of theology, law, and culture on those whose own ways had proven to be unfit and inferior? In success or failure, we are still surrounded by powers that work to shape our allegiance, and we are often complicit in that work ourselves.

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

So, when Isaiah tells his people that the God who breathed the breath of life into them now upholds them and delights in them, and has chosen them to be servants charged with bringing justice into the world, enlightening the blind and freeing the prisoners, it sounds preposterous. Isaiah's words do not match reality; God must be dreaming, or else God is very naive about where the real power lies. Only God the Spirit can make God's Word bloom into reality, but we do not believe in that Spirit. We believe in other spirits. It is the spirits of the powers-that-be that we fear and look to for life. Isaiah says of the servants, "Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger whom I send? Who is blind like my dedicated one, or blind like the servant of the LORD?" (Isaiah 42:19). So we sit in darkness.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No God*

The gods, idols, or systems to which we have bowed down can perpetuate the way things are; they can even rearrange the characters, so that sometimes we are up and sometimes we are down. But they cannot make anything new. Isaiah speaks to us in God's name, urging us to turn our praise to God alone because that is the only one to whom it really belongs. This is the God who has made new things from the very beginning when the heavens and the earth were created and human beings were given life. God refuses to share glory with anything else that we might glorify. Our idolatry will destroy us.

PROGNOSIS: The New Things

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *A Creating God*

The Word from God that Isaiah shared with his people was not a description of the way things were or are. God was declaring a new thing, telling the people about something before it happened, something not seen before. God was making a new way. When the exiles were allowed to return home they began to get a taste of the promise God made through Isaiah, but life never measured up to the fullness of that promise. In time, out of that community (home but subject to the Roman empire), the Holy Spirit brought forth Jesus from the flesh of Mary, the flesh of God's people. Isaiah's words came true in Jesus throughout the time of his service as he "went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). Those who knew Jesus could not help but see him in Isaiah's words: "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" (Isaiah 42:1). The powers-that-be recognized the threat he posed to them, and so he was killed. But when God raised Jesus from his apparent defeat those who knew Jesus remembered his baptism and now understood that the Spirit had come to him and God had claimed him as "my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : A Fulfilling Spirit

Having fulfilled “all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15), the Lord Jesus takes us by the hand and keeps us (Isaiah 42:6). Peter tells the Gentile Cornelius that God was “preaching peace” to all of us “by Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). He opened the eyes of the blind servants so that they became witnesses and through their witness to God’s Word in Jesus, even the Gentiles (us) have been drawn into God’s promises and their fulfillment by the Holy Spirit. By our own baptisms we have been incorporated into this Messiah (or Christ) and have become servants with him, chosen and delightful to God, called into a community of gentleness toward the bruised reeds and flickering wicks, of freedom to the imprisoned, and of light to the nations. Service to this kind of God takes us beyond “the way things are.” That has become the past, “the former things” (Isaiah 42:9), and our sin along with it. As Peter says, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). We are in a world of new things springing forth among us and even through us as God’s Spirit releases divine creativity.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : A Liberating Justice

If the former things are over and the new things have begun, then what might this mean for us if we are among the defeated, the exiled, the refugees? What might it mean for us if we are among the powerful, the rule-makers, the empire? With eyes, ears, spirits, and tongues released, it is time to talk together about God’s hand at work in ways previously unimaginable. For God upholds God’s servants and brings forth justice. In a community spanning the millennia we pray, “May the LORD give strength to his people; may the LORD bless his people with peace” (Psalm 29:11).