

1 Sunday after Epiphany – Year A – January 9, 2011
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17
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I don't know anyone who enjoys exams, including me. When I took the advanced level physics exam, it included a three hour practical in the lab. The lab exam was organized so that all the equipment was provided for the students to set up an experiment to prove a theory or to derive the necessary data to explain some aspect of physics, like the properties of water, light, sound, electricity and so on. The experiments were staged so students rotated around the room. I got to one station and there was a prism, a ruler, some paper, and a few other bits and pieces. Since I had no idea what I was so supposed to be doing or proving, I simply toyed with the prism, and admired the beautiful colors of refraction, before moving on to the next experiment. On reflection, we all view the world through different lenses, some are as broad as a prism, others as limiting as all the other "isms" we can name.

Today's reading from Isaiah provides us with God's way of viewing justice, as well as how God's servants are empowered to establish God's justice in the world. Since today is also the Sunday on which we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, and renew our own Baptismal vows, we will be examining our faithfulness through the lens of our Baptismal covenant as well. The practices described by the prophet Isaiah for the people to hear and cherish, so captured Jesus' imagination that His life and ministry is considered by Christians to be a fulfillment of these prophetic words. Matthew provides us with an account of Jesus' baptism by John. It is as if Jesus rises up from the river Jordan, baptized and affirmed by God, in a burst of shimmering water droplets, forming a rainbow cloud of possibilities. From that moment, His ministry is saturated with the vision of Isaiah's servant, establishing justice, reconciliation and healing.

Let's see how our imaginations can be caught with the same fervor as Jesus in our own ministry of service to the Lord, and to our neighbors. Biblical scholar, Paul D. Hanson, finds this first servant song from Isaiah, to be a "catalyst for reflection on the nature of the response demanded by all those who have received a call from the Lord." Our Baptismal vows not only reflect a statement of Who we believe in and trust our lives to, but also the work of reconciliation and justice to which God leads us as members of Christ's Body. The identity of the servant in Isaiah's poem is not clear. Is it describing a single leader, or a whole body of people, like Israel, chosen to be God's light to the nations? Isaiah's prophetic words have great significance for the people exiled in Babylon, asking hard questions about God's character and care for His people. In the midst of deep crisis, God chose to speak a word of hope, a promise of renewal, liberation, and justice. Since the coming of Jesus, Christians have woven together the Isaiah's servant songs with the life, ministry and person of Jesus Christ. Yet, you and I also need to read the Scripture as a personal letter from God, who is highly invested in humanity, and all of creation. God intends for us to be in right relationship with God and one another. Anyone who serves the servant, as we serve God in Christ Jesus, is also granted intimacy with God, given the power to become children of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah's words extend beyond a single person, or a single nation. They are meant for all who have accepted the gift of faith, by God's grace, and are commissioned through baptism to grow in Christ, and serve the Lord. As Jesus' disciples, we are co-missioners with Him in God's desire for reconciliation, healing, and justice.

Just as God chooses the servant, upholds them, and delights in them, we too are chosen by God to serve. In the promise of our baptismal covenant, our service to God in Christ Jesus is shaped by the words of Isaiah that Jesus modeled in His own life. God's will is done on earth as in heaven, and that means God's justice will be done. Unlike the world's justice, God's justice is born of faith and grace. It is birthed through tenderness and compassionate care, especially for the most vulnerable amongst us in every age. True servants of God in Christ protect what is weak until the tender shoots are strong enough to stand alone, or until the flickering spark is kindled into a mighty flame. As God's children and God's servants, we bring God's justice into the world by living faithfully in patient persistence, non-violence, and enduring mercy.

An agent of God's justice is one who stands as a humble servant, not a conquering hero, one who embodies compassion and righteousness. To live consistently in the service of the justice of God is to pattern our lives on the nature of God, as revealed to us in our savior, Jesus Christ. It is to set aside our own "isms" like consumerism, judgmentalism, racism, and to begin to see the world through God's eyes.

In the book, *Crazy Talk*, an alternative theological dictionary, justice is defined as "A condition that most people desire for themselves, claim never to get, and have no interest in granting to their neighbors." Justice is far more than fairness. It can perhaps be more accurately defined as the ordering of society in the way desired and demanded by God such that life can thrive. In that respect, justice extends beyond human concerns, to the entire creation, including such concerns as water conservation, good stewardship of non-renewable energy sources, and the care and protection of the environment through recycling wherever possible. A just society is more than a fair society, it also means that society must pay special attention to the most disadvantaged, and therefore God's desire is that all society is structured to be merciful and compassionate.

Let's look at a simple example. Fair trade coffee. That little phrase allows us to embody our faith, and bring forth God's justice. In the world's economy, price is king. Large wholesale buyers have a significant edge in keeping prices low, because they buy in large quantities. That forces the large-scale producers to demand lower costs from the growers. Coffee grows best in some of the poorest countries of the world. In real life, the result of such market pressures is that growers exploit their workers by paying very low wages. These people are already living on or below the poverty line. In an economy where price is king, a small entrepreneur, who is trying to make a living for him- or herself, their family, and perhaps a few workers, has no way to break into the market and sell their coffee at a living wage, let alone at a profit. Their volume potential is low, and their prices are inevitably higher.

Now consider the justice of purchasing fair trade coffee, which is what we serve here at Our Saviour. Fair trade coffee is a little more expensive, because producers are guaranteed a fair price. By fair price I mean a price that ensures a living wage for all the workers. That allows the smaller producers and their workers to thrive, while you and I hardly notice the slightly higher price. By buying fair trade coffee, we're actively promoting God's justice in the world. It's more than being fair in monetary terms. We're actually taking care of some of the most disadvantaged people in a healthy, compassionate way that promotes dignity through work, and independence from exploitation, or freedom from slave labor. Purchasing fair trade goods helps the people involved not just to survive, but to thrive. This is just one example of how God's justice can and does work in the world today. As everyone who came to our Annual Gift Fair knows, fair trade products extend beyond coffee, to all kinds of products. Every time we buy fair trade in preference to mass produced item, we are living our faith, and truly making a difference for God's justice.

Justice has a lot to do with the way we view the world, and the lenses through which we see or don't see. In the words of Katherine Tyler Scott, "Isms fit best in prisms. Perceptions from different angles, reflecting the light of truth, and brilliance of color. All different, and of Supreme value.... The light from within and without, so pure, so true, so lovely.... To block the light casts a shadow. To choose [our own] lens limits our vision. While not destroying truth, will keep us from experiencing the wholeness of what we and others are.... While not destroying our spirits will imprison them.... You have the power to shape the view, create the angle, reflect the light, transform isms into prisms." God delights in each of His children, and He has chosen us to serve Him by opening eyes that are blind to His love and grace, and setting captives free through His justice. We don't have to explain the physics of His grace; we simply have to reflect His light, truth, and justice into the world to the glory of His name.

Amen.