



Rev Nancy M Raabe

Grace Lutheran Church
Hatfield PA

Exile

Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

The conventional understandings of baptism—the washing away of sin, the dying to the old person and the birth of the new – don't apply to Jesus, who was

already without sin. So why did he need to be baptized, and why did he need to be baptized by John?

John apparently had the same question. He even tried to prevent it: "It is I who should be baptized by you, not the other way around," he objects. To John, baptizing Jesus might have even seemed blasphemous. Since his was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and for Jesus neither repentance nor forgiveness was an issue. Yet, Jesus says his baptism must occur "to fulfill all righteousness." But for Jesus it was not a personal matter; rather, here he is marked by God's Spirit and God's voice for public life.

"This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased," God affirms, and we cannot help but hear this as the fulfillment of Isaiah 42: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights."

The parallels are stunning. Just as the people of Jesus' time were desperate in their longing for the Messiah, the one who would fulfill their deepest hopes and dreams and deliver them from the oppression of Roman rule, so the servant that Isaiah proclaimed came at a time when the hope was on the verge of extinction.

In the sweep of Israel's history, God had delivered his chosen people from bondage in Egypt, made a covenant with them, and led them through wilderness into the land of Canaan. They became a nation and built a great temple. But they repeatedly strayed from God's commandments; ignoring their prophets' warnings, the nation split into two kingdoms, and first the northern and then the southern were conquered and utterly devastated by invading armies.

The glorious temple was reduced to rubble and the entire population hauled off in chains into exile. They cried out: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." They raged against their conquerors: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against a rock." They were furious: How could God have abandoned them? Were they still even God's people? Was God even God? All they could see was that God had withdrawn favor and punished them for their disobedience.

Into the midst of this identity crisis, Isaiah brings them face to face with one who shows them who God is and how God works. This chosen servant is not just a light to the nations but keeper of the cosmic order of compassionate justice that governs the entire universe. His power is not wielded from without but imparted from within: Power in the midst of vulnerability. Power that does not scream or shout. Power conveyed to people so even in the midst of their brokenness -- or especially the midst of their brokenness -- they also might be a light to all nations.

In later chapters Isaiah goes on to reveal this as a life-giving power for the people of Israel that goes far beyond their borders. In the spirit of the same radical reversal that mark Jesus' ministry, he proclaims a highway through the desert, water in the wilderness, the wilderness becoming like Eden, and fertility where there was barrenness. The servant brings sight to the blind, and light and life to those who find themselves trapped in dark dungeons (verses 6-7).

But what this prophecy really does, through its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, is to call us into the same vocation. We too are called to become as keepers of the cosmic order of compassionate justice, because God's Spirit has also been put into us in our baptism.

How do we understand this vocation?

- Living out the compassionate order of God's justice involves acts of generosity and prayer that do not draw attention to us but rather channel God's light onto others so that they may reflect God's glory.
- Living out the compassionate order of God's justice involves supporting good government, which Martin Luther understood as a reflection of God's desire that all people live in peace and harmony.
- Living out the compassionate order of God's justice involves advocacy of the most vulnerable – "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench." Rather than discarding the dimly burning wick that it is about to flicker out, we attend to it so that once again it may spread light.
- Living out the compassionate order of God's justice involves the restoration of those who have languished on the margins of society, and the reform of oppressive political structures: "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

The opposite of order is chaos, and chaos, as we know, is the Devil's favorite tool. To beat the Devil we must work for good order grounded in all aspects of life, order that is grounded in God's compassion for all things in creation. To take a mundane example, this is why we have traffic laws. Day after day as I wait in my narrow lane to turn onto or off of Route 309, as torrents of cars whiz by, I marvel at how I have not yet witnessed a single collision in these challenging circumstances. This is because people know that they absolutely must follow the rules or everything right there in those wild and crazy four lanes of opposing traffic will completely fall apart.

Whatever you are doing, whether driving conscientiously, voting responsibly, feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, or upending the old order of systemic injustice, be bold in seeing yourself as a light to the nations. Embrace this vocation even if your light does not feel very bright at time. Perhaps you see your own wick as dimly burning, or maybe it even feels like it's about to flicker out. Even then, and especially then, hear Isaiah's words today: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand." Open your hands and let the winds of the Spirit fan that smoldering wick back into flame.

Amen.