

Intentional and Unexpected

- [Isaiah 42:1-9](#)
- [Matthew 2:1-12](#)
- [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

Because Christmas Day fell on a Sunday, today is an interesting day liturgically. It is the Sunday closest to Epiphany but it is also the Baptism of Jesus – both of these are considered major feasts of Christ. In earlier times there would have been a big church service on Friday to celebrate Epiphany, but since we didn't do that we have a juggling game. Several of my colleagues have opted to celebrate Epiphany today and miss the Baptism altogether but our Liturgy Committee chose to add them together, a bit like Palm Sunday where we start the service with the Procession of the Palms and end it a week later in the Crucifixion. That is a fast forward of one week, today we screeched through about twenty-eight years – the majority of Jesus' lifetime, of which we know next to nothing.

But there is a theme which runs through both these readings – it is the underlying theme of this season of Epiphany – the appearance of the divine in Jesus. If we use the words of John's gospel, it is the light coming into the world. The light coming into the world and intentionally connecting with humanity. The magi were not tourists who randomly happened upon the Holy Family, they were people who dedicated years of their lives to following the star and the epiphany that it promised.

And of course, what is so amazing is that in this account, the second group of people to receive the epiphany, the revelation of the incarnation were foreigners, strangers, Gentiles, probably people of another faith. The incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ was revealed not just to the shepherds, poor Jewish folk, but also to foreigners of privilege yet it was not immediately revealed to the court of Herod nor to the Roman governor. God intentionally made Godself known in unexpected ways.

Fast forward twenty-eight years, and Jesus did not happen upon John and think it might be a good idea to get baptized, his was an intentional act. We heard, “Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him.” John wasn’t expecting it. John didn’t imagine that the Son of God would come to him to be baptized, and he probably didn’t expect the Holy Spirit to show up in a visible form.

Now let’s turn for a moment to the Old Testament reading, that beautiful prophecy from Isaiah. It is the first of four poetic passages known as the servant songs, and it has two parts. The first talks about the servant and the second about the purpose of the servant. God says, “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.” That is the purpose, that is God’s intention – for the servant to be a covenant, a light, a revelation of Godself. And the rest of that second part puts it within the context of God as the Creator of everything.

So the glorious and astonishing Creator of the entire universe is intentionally sending his servant to bring freedom and light and not just to declare God’s covenant but to be, to inhabit and express God’s covenant. The intention is God’s but the concrete work on the ground, the process of revealing, is delegated to the servant.

But who exactly is the servant? When Isaiah was writing Jesus was not yet a thing, so to understand it within its original context we have to take off our Christian glasses for a moment. When Isaiah or his followers wrote this, they may have understood the servant to be the coming Messiah or they may have understood Israel as a nation to be the servant. A couple of chapters later we hear “Now listen, Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen.” (Is. 44:1) In that passage God is speaking to the whole people as the servant. So it is the people of Israel who are to carry out God’s intention of bringing the light to those who are in darkness.

The apostle Paul understood the young Christian church to be the new embodiment of this spiritual aspect of Israel. And he was not the only one. The first letter of Peter tells us, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. You once were not a people but now you are God’s people.” (I Pet.2:9,10a)

I am about to make an important intuitive leap. It is backed by scholarship but it may take a moment to grasp, so buckle your seatbelts and listen up.

The servant that Isaiah talks about is us, people of God. Yes, it was the spiritual calling of the people of Israel but the church now shares in that calling; and yes it was a prophecy about the Christ but the church now shares in that calling as we are the Body of Christ. We are now the servant, we are the ones whom God has “given... 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.”

We are now “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of God’s own, so that we may proclaim the virtues of the one who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light. [We] once were not a people but now we are God’s people.” (I Pet.2:9,10a) We are God’s people, we are the servant who is to carry out the intention of the Creator.

Back to the gospel reading, John is resistant to baptizing Jesus, but Jesus says, “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” This introduces the theme of righteousness that is important for the writer of Matthew’s gospel so we will be revisiting it all year. But what is important today is that little word “us”. Does that just refer to Jesus and John or is Jesus extending it further? Is Jesus saying “it is proper for the people of God in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”?

For that is the mark of the chosen race, the royal priesthood... it is the mark of baptism when in a sacrament that just takes a few earthly minutes we are marked as Christ's own for ever and translated into the servant people.

And if that is so, if Jesus was including all of us in his response to John, is it too much of a stretch to hear the words of God the Creator saying to us as well as to Jesus, "This is my child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

It is unexpected that God would choose you and me to be part of God's epiphany, God's revelation to the world, but it is very intentional. It is as intentional as showing the star to the magi.

We are the ones my friends. We are not the only ones, but we are the ones whom God has chosen to carry out God's mission. We are the ones to whom God says today "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... See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare."

Hallelujah!