

Jesus, a Light for the Nations

Isaiah 42:1-7

by Michael G. Lilienthal

You who have been baptized into Jesus' name,

We can see our Savior now. We often think of Christmas as the time of Jesus' coming, and that's not untrue; although strictly speaking, he had *come* nine months prior when he was conceived in Mary's womb, and strictly speaking again, he had not begun his public work until thirty years later when he was baptized by John in the Jordan River. We've left the season of Christmas now. It ended on January 6th, the 13th day after Christmas, which is the holiday of the Epiphany. An epiphany in general usage means a realization, an enlightenment, an *aha!* moment. Epiphany in liturgical usage, when referring to the Church Year, means the *real-ization* of the Christ, the *light-enment* of God's Son shining on the world, the *aha!* of our eyes beholding him. Epiphany means that God has lifted the veil that hid the Messiah from sight so that the world can see him.

In your personal devotions on Wednesday you may have encountered mention of Epiphany, which traditionally includes mention of the magi, the wise men, who came from the east. They came from afar to worship the one whose star they saw lighting the night sky. The light which then could not help but peek through to those who watched for it is now, after the Christ entered his public ministry, spread out in glory, for this Jesus is **a light for the nations**.

I. He Fulfills the Covenant

“I will give you as a covenant for the people,” God says to this servant, this Messiah. Through his prophets and direct revelations to his chosen people, God has been foreshadowing the coming of this Savior, promising deliverance through him. We knew early on that this Savior would be a man, for God promised man’s antagonist Satan,

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

More than a thousand years later we learned that he would come from a specific family, race, and nation of man, for God promised Abraham,

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and
make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will
bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will
curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be
blessed. (Gen. 12:2-3)

Again centuries later Isaiah prophesied that this Savior would be known as the “servant” of יהוה, beginning here in this song, when God proclaims to his people, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, / my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

Man. Seed of Abraham. Israel. Servant of יהוה. These are all revealed names of the Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, the Savior of the world. These four terms also, however, are names of others.

“Man” of course is the broadest. Everyone born in Adam’s line is, according to the flesh, a physical man. And yet “man” is also divided. Two brothers demonstrated

that divide, when Abel's offering was more revered than his brother Cain's, and Cain grew jealous and killed Abel. God declared his curse for his crime: "And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand" (Gen. 4:11). Man was made out of the ground, and yet now one branch of mankind would be "cursed from the ground" – this is the wicked – while the other branch of mankind is beloved by God – this is the righteous, man as descended from Adam according to the spirit, that is, in faith. But this all must be further distilled into the one pure end: "Jesus...the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat," all the way down to "Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:23-24, 38). The Messiah is the one true and final "man," the fulfillment of all that is attributed to the name.

"Seed of Abraham" and "Israel" are similar. According to the flesh, these names belong to the whole physical nation of Israel, for Abraham begat Isaac, who begat Jacob, who begat twelve sons from whom came the twelve tribes of Israel. And yet, even within the Old Testament nation of Israel, the Seed of Abraham was divided into the believing seed and the unbelieving seed: not all the seed according to the flesh were seed according to the spirit, and neither were all the seed according to the spirit seed according to the flesh. But believers, followers and heirs of Abraham's faith, they are, in a truer sense, "Seed of Abraham" and "Israel," as St. Paul writes: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:28-29). This same thing he writes elsewhere: "This

mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6). This, too, is finally distilled down into ultimately one who is the true and final "Israel," the fulfillment of all that is attributed to the name: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

The same is true of the "servant," which in Isaiah's prophecies just after this song is attributed a different way:

Hear, you deaf,
and look, you blind, that you may see!
Who is blind but my servant,
or deaf as my messenger whom I send?
Who is blind as my dedicated one,
or blind as the servant of the LORD?
He sees many things, but does not observe them;
his ears are open, but he does not hear. (Is. 42:18-20)

Described this way, this "servant" is one who has been taught saving faith and yet is blind and deaf to it, refusing to heed it. Because of the sins of this servant, Isaiah says, "So [God] poured on him the heat of his anger" (42:25). This is the "servant" according to the flesh. And just prior the name "servant" was attributed in yet another different way. God spoke through Isaiah:

But you, Israel, *my servant*,
Jacob, whom I have chosen,
the offspring of Abraham, my friend;
you whom I took from the ends of the earth,
and called from its farthest corners,
saying to you, 'You are my servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you off';
fear not, for I am with you;

be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Is. 41:8-10)

This is God's "servant" according to the spirit, according to faith, the believers and friends of the Lord. And in the section on which we meditate today, this name "servant" is distilled finally into one, who is the true "servant," the fulfillment of all which is attributed to the name who is himself given "as a covenant for the people, / a light for the nations."

When God dealt with the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and with the prophets, Moses, Isaiah, Elijah, dealing with the people and establishing the covenant with them, surrounded by laws like the Ten Commandments, and the ceremonial laws which governed sacrifices and worship for this people, and the civil law which governed their daily lives and their government, we know for a fact that it was not obedience to these laws which saved their souls, for we're told that Abraham "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). These laws and sacrifices and covenants all were designed to represent the truth to come in the form of the Messiah. The writer to the Hebrews puts it: "For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near" (Heb. 10:1). Those sacrifices and laws were like the wrapping paper around a gift given. When Christ finally came and "had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (10:12), that wrapping paper was torn away. Do you place more value in the wrappings, or in the gift itself? This is why Jesus, the servant, is described himself as

a covenant for the people,
 a light for 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.

He brought that light into the world, and “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Heb. 10:14). For that reason, all his titles (Man, Seed of Abraham, Israel, Servant of יהוה) become ours, belonging to *all the nations*, Jew or Gentile, for “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Take to heart what the Lord says through his prophet Isaiah: “Behold my servant.” Behold him with eyes of faith.

II. He Brings Forth Justice

This “Behold” comes at an interesting time in Isaiah’s prophecies. One verse prior God had spoken about idols: “Behold, they are all a delusion; / their works are nothing; / their metal images are empty wind” (Is. 41:29). The case of the idols is set into a deliberately contradictory juxtaposition to the case of the servant.

Whereas the idols “are all a delusion,” the servant, God says, “I uphold” – this servant is made real by the almighty God, and sustained by him, by “God, the LORD,” who Isaiah says “created the heavens and stretched them out, / who spread out the earth and what comes from it”; but false gods exist only in the minds of their worshipers, worshipers who can accomplish nothing substantial, and idols which are less powerful than they.

Whereas the idols are made of “metal images” which are “empty wind,” God says of the servant, “I have put my Spirit upon him” – the spirit, or essence of life, is

nonexistent within these “metal images,” but “God, the LORD,” Isaiah says, is the one “who gives breath to the people on [the earth] / and spirit to those who walk in it.” Recall the creation of Adam: “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Gen. 2:7). God, who has the power of life’s essence itself, who gave all men their living essence, gives to his servant an infinitely more potent force: “I have put *my* Spirit upon him,” God says. This is not just any old living force, but it is *the* living force, which is a divine person of the Godhead himself, the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, whereas of the idols it is said, “their works are nothing,” God says of his servant, “he will bring forth justice to the nations.” Since this almighty God was sustaining his work, we can be certain that the servant’s work is accomplished, as St. Peter told it: “you yourselves know what happened...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:37-38). “The Lord has taken hold of this Servant, placed Him in the world and sustains Him so firmly that no power can overthrow Him, as if to say: Here is My Servant, let us see who is able to stand against Him.”¹

This servant is a mighty man, a conqueror like Cyrus who took Israel into bondage. And yet he is distinct. He brings about drastic changes, but he does so

¹ August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, 178.

quietly, gently: “a bruised reed he will not break, / and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.” He does not destroy; he saves. The prophet states:

he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be discouraged
till he has established justice in the earth.

A great, Herculean task faces this servant, one too great for any mortal prophet, or any mere man. He is supported by God – he *is* very God. And through the greatest suffering he works, and “faithfully bring[s] forth justice.” He will actually, certainly, “effectively plant His judgment, His Gospel, in the hearts of the broken-hearted, so that they possess it as their own, in faith.”²

As certain as this suffering servant’s cross was planted on a hill at Golgotha, as certain as his body was planted in a tomb, and as certain as that body rose again on the third day, so certain is his Gospel, his “justice,” planted in our hearts by faith, so that although we suffer, although we die, we rise with him. This is Jesus, the light of the nations, promised by “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 on it
and spirit to those who walk on it.

So we can be secure in the knowledge of our salvation, revealed so clearly in this light.

Amen.

² Ibid., 181.