

# The Servant, a Light to the Nations

## 42

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. <sup>2</sup> He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; <sup>3</sup> a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. <sup>4</sup> He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching. <sup>5</sup> Thus 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: <sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. <sup>8</sup> I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. <sup>9</sup> See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Acts 10:34-43 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

## Gentiles Hear the Good News

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup> That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup> We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

**January 12, 2020**  
**Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43**  
**Kerra Becker English**

**He** will bring justice to the nations.

**You** will be a light to the nations.

God shows no partiality - even if you aren't from the Center of the Universe - however that "center" gets defined.

Peter didn't get this for the longest time. If you read through the book of Acts, essentially it's all about Peter and Paul arguing over the direction of the early church as they tried to re-center what Jesus had decentralized through his ministry. Even during Jesus' time on earth, the center of the universe was known to the Israelites, and they were it. They were chosen by God as a people. They were challenged by God to be an example and a light to other nations. Even in the midst of exile and control by other national entities, their identity remained intact. And when they lost connection, the prophets called them back to who they were and centered them in the teachings they should have always known by heart. Even today, Judaism is an identity as well as a religion. It's who you are and how you live, as well as how you worship God.

In this way, Jesus fully identified with the tradition in which he had been raised. He learned Torah and prayed in the temple. He argued with the elders. He revered Moses and Elijah. He preached like the prophets. He leaned on the wisdom of the sages. And when he prayed, he frequently "borrowed" lines from the Psalms. His spiritual truth didn't stray far from his ancestry attested to in all the gospels.

What is notable about Jesus, though, was that he wasn't content to stay planted in a limited center. Though he wasn't the only one who ever did that, he did get in enough trouble for it that

it characterized his interpretation of God and God's purposes in the world. His world included Samaritans, Centurions, and Syrophonecians. He had conversations with women and included them in his circle of friends, dare I say, disciples. He ate and DRANK with tax collectors, fishermen, and an assortment of sinners of every variety. He honored the poor and confronted the rich. He consistently wrangled with his contemporaries about inclusion and exclusion, about what was essential and what was superfluous. His mere existence threatened the power of Kings - known always for having the universe revolve around them.

In the church calendar, today is the Sunday we commemorate the very beginning of Jesus' ministry with his baptism. In Matthew's gospel, the notable feature about Jesus' baptism is that John intends to refuse to do it. In more than one gospel, he says he's not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals, but in Matthew, John and Jesus have to have a discussion about whether John is going to perform this rite of passage or not. John the Baptist was no centrist in his teaching and preaching - but he knew that Jesus held more spiritual authority than he did, and baptism was a sign of submission, of dying to the old self, of cleansing and renewal, things he thought Jesus had no need of. John was saying by his surprise at this request, I need this more than Jesus, and here Jesus is, asking it of me. Again, we find Jesus standing on the periphery, siding with the margins, and with this, the voice from heaven is well pleased.

Circling back to the passage from Acts, Peter is once again preaching, as he often does, quite a new thing about the centrality of Jesus for this message of hope and love from God. But Peter, the rock on which the church gets built, is the one with the conservative, traditionalist impulse. Remember that Peter is the one who wants to require that new converts keep the whole law, circumcision included. He expects anyone converting to change their diet, and adopt the various

food restrictions that weren't as common in the rest of the world. And it keeps getting him in fights with Paul, the progressive who will let in absolutely anybody - no strings attached. We need both types in the church - and from era to era - because what defines tradition or innovation can change. Take note that in 1644, the Cromwellian Puritans sought to destroy all organs in Cathedrals as the "King of instruments" should not be used to worship the "King of heaven." Organ music was thought way too worldly for the worship of God. ("Milton and Music, or the Pandaemonic Organ," Helen Williams and Peter Williams, The Musical Times)

In scripture sometimes context is everything, and it helps to understand this passage to know WHERE Peter is preaching when he delivers this message. He is preaching in the home of Cornelius, having been summoned by this centurion of an Italian regiment following a vision Peter had of eating every unclean animal he could imagine. He has this, what I'm sure that to him, was a grotesque vision, then he is asked to bring the message to a Gentile audience by a man who had been praying and giving alms to the poor and likely set up the whole thing with a full barbeque out back - pulled pork, grilled shrimp, and cheeseburgers on the menu..

Peter, who thought his life had ALREADY been changed by being called to follow Jesus, was further called to be more open in the ways of his traditions and understandings. The love of God was going beyond the familiar Israelite circle and was about to include more, and more, and more people grafted into this covenant, not by their family connections, but by their connection to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Peter, whether he wanted to or not, was going to be a part of that growth and change. Paul was already out there preaching throughout the Mediterranean world, but this put both of them out there preaching a new idea about what was central to this way of faith. It was no longer just a call to the Israelites, it was a message that anyone and

everyone could be touched by the love of God. Anyone could receive forgiveness taught by a traveling preacher who could heal and cast out demons, who was raised from the dead to judge with both righteousness and love at the right hand of God.

The center shifted. The universe remained the same.

God is still God of the universe, always has been, always will be. We worship the God of all peoples, all nations, all planets, all galaxies, all that is around us both known and unknown. God is the constant.

What is central has some greater flexibility, but not a whole lot. It's about how we understand OUR place in that universe, and in relationship to God. Judaism, Christianity, and other religions as well figure out what will be included in the center and then the central things don't move as much or as often. Is it an identity, like the Israelites? Is it a person we intend to emulate, like Jesus? Is it a way of life? Is it a call to love? The adherents of any one particular faith are connected by that truth, and live it out, we presume, as an expression of their faith in the world.

What is constantly shifting are those lines of inclusion and exclusion. How do we continue to express what is central to us, and yet hear clearly when God is calling us to a new thing? Peter had a vision, a vision of chowing down on some animals that he wasn't supposed to eat due to their uncleanness. I'm not sure it's always that clear for us. Sometimes our willingness to do a new thing turns on votes at our national assemblies. Sometimes it's about how we treat each other in the place where everyone knows our name. Sometimes it's about music, or art, or any variety of other cultural expectations. We open ourselves to different expressions that help us sing or see or welcome differently. But as I look at these stories, and as I think about religion and

its trajectory over time - the circles tend to expand, then contract a bit, then expand again. I had a religion professor in college who looked at that phenomenon as a pendulum - swinging out to one side, then swinging back through to correct itself and then to the other side, and on it goes. He may have been partially right - I think it's also a spiral in that we learn new things with each swing that we try to move forward with us. A little bit does change or grow each time.

The challenge though for even the great disciples like Peter is to understand the difference between the universal, the central, and the culturally conditioned. What foods we choose to eat or not eat is part of that cultural conditioning. How Kosher do you keep? Or do you have new dietary laws for your health or due to your awareness of how the food we eat gets to our tables? Those things come out of the understanding of our own time and place and are widely changeable. The arguments about music on the "Happy to be a Presbyterian" facebook page may get heated, but ultimately what we choose to sing or play in worship is about a preference - not something to criticize other Christians for who happen to like something different. By the way - bluegrass Mass is happening tonight at 5 p.m. at St James the Less if you want to shake up your musical understanding of church a bit tonight!

Now I do think we are living in a time when the center of Christianity is taking a beating. We will need to disentangle it from all nationalisms - and not just American nationalism - if we are going to continue to follow the Jesus of the gospels. There are places where the two just don't easily mix. When Isaiah says, "He will bring justice to the nations, You will be a light to the nations," it doesn't erase national lines, but it does put those lines in context. God does not choose to love one nation at the exclusion of all others. This was not true for the Israelites. It's not true now. Jesus was sent to bring a message to love that would inspire the movement outward

we now call Christianity, and Jesus' message of love ultimately is a message of hope even outside of Christian identity as well. It's an expression of the universal truth that God is Lord over it all.

So friends, here we sit in Ashland, the center of the universe - tongue in cheek I know - but it's also a reality. By a combination of the luck of our births and the decisions of our lives, we find ourselves here. How we define that center, what gets put in that place of priority, makes a difference - both for how we treat the essentials and the non-essentials. God has the universe part covered. Live from your center, and let Christ be central in your lives. Amen.