Bruised reeds and barrels of wine

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Isaiah 42:1-9 (First servant song)

The book of Isaiah is a long and complicated book. It has 66 chapters (it’s the third longest prophetic book, after Jerimiah and Ezekiel), with lots of prophetic statements and occasional bits of history and reflections on how the prophet received his call. Most (but not all) serious Biblical researchers think it’s divided into two big sections written hundreds of years apart. One Bible scholar I read says that Isaiah has a “luxuriance of imagery[[1]](#endnote-1).” I like that phrase.

As it turns out, our lectionary is highlighting several passages from Isaiah during the Epiphany season, and so I hope to focus in a bit on this long and complicated book. We’ll do nothing like an adequate job, but I believe we’ll get some good insights as we ponder sections of it.

For example, last week, we looked at Isaiah 43:18-19, where Isaiah called us to forget the former things – meaning that God was going to do such wonderful things for God’s people that even the wonderful things God has already done will pale in comparison, and maybe not even be worth remembering. And God was talking about big events, like the Exodus and the passing through the destructive waters of the Red Sea. In fact, it strongly hinted that God’s might was displayed via destructive force previously (as in the destruction of Israel’s enemies) but the new thing was to provide life; moving from the destructive flood at the Red Sea to life-giving streams in the desert.

This week, we ponder Isaiah 42:1-9, especially the first four verses:

1 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.

2 He will not cry or lift up his voice,

or make it heard in the street;

3 a bruised reed he will not break,

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;

he will faithfully bring forth justice.

4 He will not grow faint or be crushed

until he has established justice in the earth;

and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

This is one of the so-called “servant songs” in Isaiah, all of which appear in the second section of the book starting in chapter 40 (Here is the complete list if you want to do your study: 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13—53:12). These songs, or poems, or prophetic utterances all deal with a mysterious Servant. It’s mysterious because the focus seems to shift back and forth between talking about one person, a Moses or Messiah-like figure and talking about the whole of the nation of Israel. This is part of the “luxuriance of imagery” I mentioned.

The author of the gospel of Matthew had no doubt that this passage referred to the Jesus who healed all, without desire for fame[[2]](#endnote-2). When Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath in the presence of his enemies. As a result, many people came to him for healing, and he cured them. But Jesus ordered them not to tell anyone about it. Matthew meditated on our passage from Isaiah (in its Greek version, naturally) and came to understand that the most important way to understand this passage was how it pointed to Jesus.

Jesus was the Servant who came to sick and hurting people, and cured them of their diseases. We all have known people who, in their illness, seem like candle flames that are about to go out, or a tender plant that has been stepped on. Jesus came to such people and, as a matter of *justice*, cured them of their illnesses. Elsewhere in Matthew, it says, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Jesus was the Servant who did these things quietly, without seeking fame. He did things transparently, in the open, but not to puff himself up. In the words of Peter’s sermon in the Acts passage we read from the lectionary, “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

Jesus has a job to do, and he did it, quietly and competently. His job was the salvation of the world, to “bring forth justice to the nations,” to aid and save people, people like me and you, in our deepest needs and in all sorts and manners of conditions.

This week, Bess and I read the story of Jesus at the Wedding in Cana[[5]](#endnote-5). Jesus’s mother, Mary, asks Jesus to help out when the wine runs out at the wedding reception. Reluctantly at first, Jesus goes about his business, quietly and competently. It was more than competently done, in fact. He turned about 150 gallons of water to fine wine, much more than the guests could possibly ask or drink.

This contrast struck me: the obedient Son, Jesus, lavishly providing for the wedding feast, and the humble Servant, careful not to extinguish the dimmest wick. I know that I have experienced both in my life. Sometimes, I have felt so low or so sad, it felt like my life was about to give out. And this passage from Isaiah has been important to me, reminding me that he will not let me break or completely lose my light. Sometimes, I have felt so extravagantly blessed, and I can see the hand of God working at every turn. Usually, I am somewhere in the middle, and I guess I experience Jesus continuing to do his job competently and well: comforting those who are grieving, bearing up people in difficult situations, restoring parents to their children (all things I have seen in the past week).

I wonder how you are experiencing Jesus these days? Is it gallons and gallons of wine? Jesus carefully tending to a flame about to go out? Jesus going about continuing to do his work in your life and the lives of the ones you love? What comfort can you take from these passages? Any prayer requests? Is there anything you can learn about being Jesus to others from these passages?

1. G.P. Hugenberger, “The Servant of the Lord in the ‘Servant Songs’ of Isaiah: a Second Moses Figure”, in P.E. Satterthwaite, R.S. Hess, G.J. Wenham, eds., *The Lord’s Anointed. Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Baker, 1995) 105-140. http://www.parkstreet.org/sites/default/files/papers/christintheot.pdf. Accessed January, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Matthew 12:15-21 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Matthew 9:36, New Revised Standard Version. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Acts 10:38, NRSV. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See John 2:1-12 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)