Isaiah 42:1-9
The Baptism of Our Lord + January 12, 2014
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Justice

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 42:1-4: “Behold 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. He will not cry aloud or lift up His voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed He will not break, and a faintly burning wick He will not quench; He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till He has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for His law.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

I. The Servant of Justice

Justice, justice, justice. We could sure use some justice around here. I’m not much for murk and gray areas, at least not in places where right and wrong are clearly defined. So I’m tired of excuses and equivocating and talk about how right and wrong are relative. I’m tired of lazy people and apathetic people. I’m tired of newspaper headlines announcing that someone guilty of some terrible crime gets a light sentence, or how an innocent man has been imprisoned for years until a DNA test clears his name. I’m tired of lawsuits which are won by the better lawyer or the side with the most money to spend, not the better evidence. I’m tired of people who aren’t willing to work hard but expect to be well off. I’m tired of celebrities who glory in their shame. I’m tired of people who get an expensive college degree in 1960s Danish Rock Music History and then blame society when they’re deep in debt with student loans and can’t get a job. I’m tired of people dumping their garbage by our dumpster—as long as they’re misusing our property, the least they could do is actually put it in the dumpster rather than leave it for someone from church to do it for them. Seriously, how lazy and inconsiderate could you possibly be?

So I want justice. I want law and order. I don’t want deception, dishonesty, whining or mitigating circumstances. I want people to recognize a clear code of right and wrong. If people do the right thing, I think they should be rewarded for their efforts. If people do the wrong thing, I think they should willingly take their medicine, apologize and make amends.

If nothing else, that felt good to say.

But...I’m not naïve. I understand that we’re sinners in a sinful world, so that justice doesn’t come naturally to anybody. Justice takes hard work; and no matter how hard we work at it, it will be imperfect as long as it is administered by sinful human beings. But this leads me to my next two thoughts. My first is that if justice takes hard work for imperfect sinners, then it makes sense that we should all work really hard at it: this isn’t a time to throw up our hands and opt for “anything goes.” Anything that takes hard work is usually the sort of thing that’s worth doing, be it marriage or memory work or practicing the violin or justice. The hard work pays off.

My second thought is this: if justice is so difficult and faulty when pursued by sinners, wouldn’t it be better if the Lord just came down and took care of justice for us?

Before you answer that question, think very, very carefully; because now we’re talking about divine justice.
See, all the examples that I've listed so far have to do with justice according to laws of man. If you're a decent law-abiding citizen, then the word justice doesn't scare you. If you're a law-abiding citizen, when you hear the word "justice" you think of words like "vindication," "fairness," "safety" and "freedom." If you're guilty of breaking the law, though, the word justice isn't so warm and fuzzy. If you're a criminal, when you hear the word "justice" you think of words like "prosecution," "punishment" and "imprisonment"—not pleasant words at all.

When it comes to the laws of man, you can be pretty law-abiding. But when it comes to the laws of God, you're simply not. You're sinful, and don't bother with the equivocation, the self-justification or the relativizing. The Lord's standard of justice is simple: you're either holy or you're not. There's no such thing as "mostly holy" or "less unholy than others." If you're holy, you're innocent. If you're not, you're guilty. Heaven is for holy people. Guilty people go to hell.

You're guilty. So do you really want the Lord to come and bring forth justice? Really?

The news alone that God sends His Servant to establish justice should be terrifying; but that news is not alone. Look at the Old Testament lesson and see how the Servant brings forth justice. He doesn't cry aloud or lift up His voice: He isn't declaring wrath, but speaking Good News. He doesn't break off bruised reeds or quench faintly burning wicks, even though they're damaged goods and less than perfect and holy. He comes as a covenant for the people—He comes with God’s promise of grace, not condemnation. He comes as a light to the nations, not to cast them into outer darkness. He comes to open the eyes that are blind, to bring prisoners out from the dungeon—not to throw mankind into the pit.

In all that the Servant does in this passage as He brings forth justice, He's giving and helping and delivering. He does so with God's approval—the whole Trinity is at work as the Father puts His Spirit on the Servant, His beloved Son. But how can this be justice? It's not like the people of Isaiah's time are any more righteous than now. If the Servant comes to establish justice, how come He's healing and helping and delivering? How come He's not knocking heads together and throwing every last unholy sinner into outer darkness?

How is this establishing justice? The guilty need to be held accountable. Someone's got to pay for all of this sin. There has to be judgment. That's how justice works, and God is certainly holy and just.

That Day of Judgment is coming; but while the Lord is perfectly just, He is also perfectly gracious and merciful. So behold how this Servant brings forth justice, and marvel at God’s love for you.

It begins—publicly, anyway—in our Gospel lesson, in the wilderness along the Jordan River.

II. The Baptism of Our Lord
There at the Jordan, John the Baptist has attracted quite a crowd. There are a few skeptical Pharisees and the like who are keeping a close eye on the goings-on, but for the most part the people are sincere. They've come to hear John prepare the way for the Savior, to hear him declare that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. They've also come to be baptized—a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

These people are well aware of their sins, and they're well aware that the wages of sin is death. We’re often shielded from the consequences of sin because things like freedom and medicine help keep oppression and death out of sight. But these folks seriously understand that this is a dying world, and that they're dying too. They understand that they have this indelible
stain of sin, they face God’s justice and eternal judgment for it and there’s nothing they can do about it. Then along comes John the Baptist declaring salvation, telling them to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins—telling them that this washing of water and the Word will do what they never could: cleanse them and wash their sins away. Repentant sinners gather in droves. They’re baptized by John. Their sins are washed away.

But when they’re washed away, where do their sins go?

That’s where the Servant comes in. The Servant of Isaiah 42—the holy Son of God born of the virgin Mary—arrives at the Jordan. He comes to be baptized by John. At first, John objects and says, “I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?” Baptism is for sinners—including John. Jesus isn’t sinful. There’s no reason for the holy Son of God to be baptized.

At least, not for Himself.

But it’s not for Himself. Jesus says, ”Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consents, to fulfill all righteousness. So it happens that the holy, sinless Son of God is baptized just like all of those sinners. Just like He’s one of them...because that’s exactly what Jesus proclaims in His baptism. He’s identifying with sinners. He’s come to take the place of sinners. If it’s helpful, imagine that all of those sins washed off all of those sinners at the Jordan now get washed onto Him. When Jesus comes out of the Jordan, He’s effectively bearing all the sins of the world. He’s the lightning rod now: and if Almighty God is going to come along and judge sinners, He’s going to come down hard on Jesus.

That’s what happens at the cross. God condemns the Sinner, for there Jesus is all sinners reduced to one. God condemns His Son for the sins of all, because His Son is bearing the sins of all as He hangs on the cross. In holiness and justice, God the Father damns His Son. For your sin.

The cross isn’t just a disconnected, separate event. It’s linked to Jesus’ baptism, and inevitably follows it. From the moment Jesus gets baptized like all those sinners, He’s taking their place and going to the cross to be judged and condemned.

And what does the Father say about this when Jesus is baptized and thus anointed as the sacrificial Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? Note what happens: the heavens open, and the Spirit of God rests upon Him—straight out of our Old Testament reading, where God declared, “I have put My Spirit upon Him.” That’s not all: a voice from heaven says, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” The Father is pleased with what Jesus is doing, because this is the plan for your salvation. This is how God can be just without you being in hell. In His mercy, He sends His Son and says, “I will take You by the hand and keep you;” and then He takes Him by the hand to Calvary.

Calvary’s not the end. The Son does not stay forsaken, but is reconciled to the Father even before He breathes His last. He’s raised up again three days later. He lives and reigns forever.

He is also coming back, to judge the living and the dead. On that day He will act with justice: He will deliver the holy to heaven and condemn the unholy to hell; and on your own, you are far from holy. That is why you don’t even think that you can slip into heaven for being cute or good or good enough. That’s why, when you do think that way, you repent and you confess such sinful arrogance. You repent, and you rejoice in Jesus—and you give great thanks for your baptism.
Jesus was baptized for you too, to take your place and suffer God’s judgment for your sin. He was crucified for you, as God found Him guilty for every last unholy bit about what you do and who you are. This is true for all, yet not all are saved: many will be condemned on the Last Day. So how can you be sure that this grace and life are for you? Because you’re baptized. That’s the joyous news of our epistle, Romans 6: in Holy Baptism, Jesus joined you to His death. You were crucified with Christ by that water and Word. So when the devil accuses and says, “You’ve still got to be condemned for your sin, you know;” you say, “No, my sins have already been died for. In fact, I’ve already died to sin. Jesus died that death for me, and He joined me to His death when I was baptized.”

Not only that, but Jesus also joined you to His resurrection. Even though the death of your body still lies in the future, you know it’s not the end. Jesus died, and Jesus lives. Unless the Lord returns soon, your body will give out; but because you are baptized, you will live forever. You’ve been joined to Jesus’ resurrection—there’s no way you can’t rise from the dead.

That’s why, when the Lord comes on Judgment Day to execute justice, there’s no fear in that for you. As you live in your baptism, repenting of sin and trusting in Jesus, you know that God sees you as holy and righteous, so heaven is yours.

If you do face the Last Day with any sort of fear, then examine yourself. See, if you’re holding onto any sort of sin because you like it or you’ve driven it down deep and don’t want to confess it or because it’s just become a habit, then you’re holding onto it and you’re not forgiven. You’ve unholy. You’re living outside of your baptism—you’re declining the forgiveness that Jesus has won for you, and so you’re set to face Judgment Day on your own, without His forgiveness. Repent now, while there’s still time.

The other reason you might fear Judgment Day is because you doubt God’s forgiveness for you in Christ. For some, it seems an act of humility to say, “I’m unforgivable;” but in fact it is an accusation that says that Jesus didn’t get the job done. Confess your doubts, and rejoice that Christ has died for all of your sins—doubts included.

Justice. We could use some justice around here. Evil’s got to be punished and sin done away with, or else it will just run wild and destroy. So long as we’re here then, we want to do our best as citizens and neighbors to proclaim what is right and wrong, and to see that justice is done. But more than that, we proclaim the Servant sent by God in Isaiah 42, who brings forth justice by His service, His sacrifice, His death on the cross in place of sinners. The Last Day is coming, and the Lord will condemn the unholy and unjust. But because the Servant has come and redeemed you, you have no fear of what the Lord will say to you at the Judgment: He’ll say, “The kingdom of heaven is yours for the sake of My Son, in whom you are forgiven for all of your sins.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen