

A Second Stewpot Bible Study

Isaiah 42:1-9

Our first **Stewpot Bible Study** was centered on Isaiah 1:1,10-20. Our second also rises from the book of Isaiah: Isaiah 42:1-9:

¹Here 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.

²He 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.

⁴He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

⁵Thus 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 on it:

⁶I 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,

⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

⁸I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.

⁹See,the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

In our first Bible Study, we used a four-way approach to Biblical interpretation which we call **ABAB** - A for *at*, B for *behind*, A for *around*, and B for *beyond* - thus approaching a passage of scripture by looking **at** it, **behind** it, **around** it and **beyond** it.

1. Looking at:

To look **at** a passage of scripture is simply to see what the words on the page say. To look **at** Isaiah 42:1-9 is to see a description of an anointed, beloved servant of God.

The passage does not reveal the identity of the servant, but it does describe the servant as one who will establish justice, be gentle with those who are struggling, and go about their work quietly, without seeking attention: *“Here is my servant...I have put my spirit upon him . He will bring forth justice... He will not cry or lift up his voice , or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.”*

Then, in the next part of the passage, God addresses God’s servant, saying in verses 6 and 7: *“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...from the prison those who sit in darkness.”*

To look **at** this passage is to see those two movements: a description **of** God's servant in verses 1-4, and an address **to** God's servant in verses 6-9.

2. **Looking behind:**

Now, let's look **behind** Isaiah 42:1-9, to see what the larger story behind the words on the page might be, which will take us back to some of what we saw in our first Stewpot Bible study, concerning who wrote Isaiah, when Isaiah was written, and what the circumstances were which surrounded, and prompted, the writing of Isaiah.

Most of the best scholarship we have indicates that the Bible book we now know as Isaiah may be a convergence of three writings, spanning more than two hundred years:

- a. First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, written, perhaps, in the eighth century BCE, before the exile;
- b. Second Isaiah, chapters 40-55, written, perhaps, in the sixth century BCE, during the exile; and
- c. Third Isaiah, chapters 56-66, written, perhaps, later in the sixth century, after the exile.

Here, it might be helpful to, in the words of the Quakers, "call for a pause," and remind ourselves of some of the basics concerning "the exile." When we speak of "the exile" in the Bible, we are referring to the forced relocation by the Babylonian army of some of the people of Judah to Babylon; an exile which began in 597 BCE, and ended with the Edict of Cyrus in 539 BCE. Most of the best scholarship we have suggests that our present passage, Isaiah 42:1-9, may have been written sometime near the end of the exile, making it part of "Second Isaiah."

(It is important always to remember that no one can speak with certainty concerning Biblical origins. Thus, we are careful to use words and phrases such as "*indicates*," "*suggests*," and "*perhaps*" when speaking of such matters.)

3. **Looking around:**

Having looked **at** and **behind** Isaiah 42:1-9, we now turn to look **around** this passage.

First, Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first of four passages which students of the Bible call the "Servant Songs": Isaiah 42:1-9, Isaiah 49:1-6, Isaiah 50:4-11, and Isaiah 52:13-53:12; passages in which, as First Testament scholar John Hayes says, a Servant of the Lord either is spoken to, spoken about, or speaks on their own.

In Isaiah 49:1-6, the servant is assigned the task of embracing the entire world in salvation (49:6). In Isaiah 50:4-11, the servant faces suffering resolutely; the servant's face "set like flint," so confident is the servant of God in the vindication of God (50:7-8). In Isaiah 52:13-53:12, the servant of God suffers for others, bearing our infirmities and carrying our diseases, and by the servant's bruises we are healed (53:4-5). Then, there is our passage, Isaiah 42:1-9, where the servant does not draw attention to the servant's self, but quietly goes about bringing God's justice to the world, never breaking a bruised reed or quenching a flickering flame (Isaiah 42:1-3).

Looking further around in the Bible, we see that our passage from Isaiah chapter 42 is referenced in the Second Testament, also called the New Testament, or the Christian Scriptures. In the gospel of Matthew, chapter 12, after learning that the Pharisees were conspiring against him, Jesus orders those following him not to make him known:

¹⁸This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah: Here is my servant, whom I have chosen, my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. ¹⁹He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory."

Those words from Matthew write Jesus into our passage from Isaiah, a way of reading the servant songs which has long been large in the life of Christianity, the idea being that, in the passages we call "the servant songs," Isaiah was predicting the way Jesus would be when Jesus eventually came. Some read the servant songs that way, as predictions about Jesus in the First Testament coming to pass in the Second Testament.

Others read the servant songs not as predictions about Jesus, but as passages which Jesus, a Jew, would have known from his life in the synagogue, passages which might have been less predictions *about* Jesus than *guides for* Jesus; scriptures which helped form and shape Jesus' life just as scripture forms and shapes our lives.

Others read the servant songs as being not about Jesus at all, but, rather, about the people of God as a community of faith, quietly working to establish justice, embracing whoever is most in need of help and hope, comfort and relief.

4. **Looking beyond:**

All of which brings us to step four we see when, having looked **at, behind** and **around** Isaiah 42:1-9, we look **beyond** it; building a hermeneutical bridge of practical application from there to here, from then to now, from Isaiah to Jackson. (Remember, *hermeneutics* is a word for the spiritual discipline of applying scripture to life, making the connections which make a difference, "building a bridge" from the page to the world; *hermeneutics*.)

Coming across the hermeneutical bridge, one part of our passage which may matter most is the part which says that the Spirit-filled servant of God will not break a bruised reed or quench a barely burning wick. Regardless of who the suffering servant was in the mind and mouth of the writer of this part of Isaiah, those words tell us how Spirit-filled servants of God live and move in the world: with kindness and gentleness, empathy and patience, healing and hope; never breaking the bruised or quenching the barely burning, but embracing the bruised, the broken, and the barely burning in hospitality and welcome; a way of living and loving to which this passage points, beyond the ancient page from which we read, to the present world in which we live.

Secondly, what about *justice*? In our passage, *justice* is lifted up three times in the first four verses, placing this servant song in a deep, wide stream of the Hebrew scriptures.. Psalm 33:5 says that God loves justice. Amos 5:24 calls for justice to roll

down like waters. Micah 6:8 names “doing justice” on the short list of things which matter most to God. Isaiah 1:17 admonishes the people of God to “seek justice.” In the Bible, the word *justice* is shorthand for making things right for all persons; perhaps another way of saying that, in the kingdom of God, all cannot be fully well for anyone until all is finally well for everyone.

Some questions for conversation:

1. In our passage from Isaiah 42,, the servant of God does not speak loudly or seek attention, a quiet way of being in the world which calls to mind those familiar words from Matthew 6:1-4, which caution us against drawing attention to ourselves with the memorable admonition, “Don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.” And yet, all congregations and organizations face the need to “tell our story.” Otherwise, how will we receive the support which is necessary to sustain our ministry? How do you reconcile the quiet humility of the servant of God with the institutional need for the institution's story to be told?
2. Along those same lines, (the Trappist monk and spiritual writer) Thomas Merton once wrote, “To disappear from the world as an object of interest, in order to enter the world in hiddenness and compassion; this is the basic movement of the spiritual life,” which sounds like the quiet servant of God in our passage from Isaiah. What do you think about Merton's description? Does it ring true to you?
3. One of the guiding values at Stewpot is the kind of “no questions asked” welcome and hospitality which, to borrow the words of our scripture passage, does not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick. (What other practices might we embody that seeks not to add to other people's pain?)
4. Have you ever been “ a bruised reed,” barely able to keep moving from one day to the next? Who helped you stay on your feet? Who helped you go through what you could not go around? Who helped keep your light lit when you were “ a smoldering wick,” about to go out? (How might what you have learned help others, particularly those who need Stewpot?)
5. Who might be among the bruised reeds and barely burning wicks in our circles of care? How might we be in solidarity with them? How can your church, mosque, synagogue or temple, along with communities of care like Stewpot, more fully embrace those who are most in need of help and hope?
6. How is justice different from mercy ? What are some specific, practical ways we can work for justice? What are some of the “justice issues” in our world today? (How does Stewpot work for justice, or not?)