

Matthew 3: 13-17

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Wade in the Water

Texts:

Matthew 3: 13-17

Isaiah 42: 1-9

A sermon preached by
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January 13, 2008

Isaiah 42: 1-9

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.

5 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: **6** 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, **7** to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. **8** I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. **9** See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

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A sweet little church lady wanted a parrot that could talk. She looked in several pet shops around town before finding exactly the one she wanted. The store owner warned the lady that the parrot had been previously owned by a bartender and though he could say most anything, the one thing he could do better than any of the bar patrons was swear.

Undaunted, the sweet lady bought the parrot convinced that she could train him differently and teach him to say good things. Everything was going well as the weeks moved along and she taught the bird to say “Praise the Lord!” and “Amen!” and “Hallelujah!” as well as a number of what she deemed acceptable Christian phrases.

One day she forgot to feed before him leaving the house and when she arrived home he was cussing up a storm. She grabbed the bird, said “I’ll teach you to never talk like that again,” and shoved him into the deep freeze closing the door on his shivering tail feathers. A few minutes later, she opened the door, took the parrot out, and asked him, “Have you learned your lesson?” “Yes, ma’am,” said the shivering parrot. “Are you going to talk that way again?” “No ma’am,” answered the bird.

A few months later, the lady forgot to feed him once again. Arriving home, the lady heard more of what she had the first time, words that would have made a sailor blush. She grabbed the parrot, threw him in the freezer again, and slammed the door. This time, though, she got to talking on the phone and forgot her poor parrot. Once she retrieved him, he was frozen near to death. She let him thaw in his cage for some time and once he seemed warm, she asked him again, “Did you learn your lesson?” “Yes, ma’am,” replied the polite parrot. “Are you going to talk like that again?” “No ma’am,” said the parrot.

He sat quietly for a few minutes and then spoke. “Pardon, ma’am, but may I ask you a question?” Startled, the old woman answered, “Of course.”

“I thought I knew all the bad words there were, but just what did that turkey in there say?”

Justice. I found that story in a book of illustrations under the category, “Justice.” Specifically under the editor’s heading, “Severe Judgment.” I guess so, huh?

Justice is what we followers of Jesus are supposed to be about. Not quite the harsh and retributive justice of that kindly, parrot-owning, church lady, but a deeper sense of the justice that God would have us live in this world.

I learned from my colleague and mentor Ted Loder that the best definition of our justice-work as Christians is that “justice is love with its sleeves rolled up.” I don’t think he coined the phrase, but he used it often throughout his 50 year, highly successful, social-justice ministry. “Justice is love with its sleeves rolled up.”

This morning, I suggest to you that our call to justice as Jesus-followers begins first with the rolling up of our pants legs as we wade in the water. It’s our baptism that calls us deeper into the waters of injustice to bring justice to those who are persecuted and righteousness to those unjustly treated by the powers of the world.

Jesus rolled up his pants legs and waded into the River Jordan. “John would have prevented him,” wrote Matthew, “‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.’” Or as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*, Jesus says, “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.”

What does it mean to put things right? What does it mean to be about God’s work in this world? What does it mean for you and me to be followers of one who wades in the water and comes out being called “Child of God”?

Isaiah knew something of what it all means. And you can be sure Jesus knew Isaiah's words inside and out. Isaiah's prophesy we heard this morning is the first of four Servant Songs in what we know as Second Isaiah, written while much of Israel is in exile in Babylon. Through the centuries Christians have presumptuously and incorrectly read these prophetic words backward as if they point particularly to Jesus but Isaiah isn't writing here specifically about the coming of Jesus as messiah. Isaiah's words, rather, are referring to the nation Israel itself as the servant, the anointed one which will be a light to the nations. "I have put my spirit upon [Israel]; [Israel] will bring forth justice to the nations. [Israel] will not cry or lift up [its] voice, or make it heard in the street; [Israel] will not break a bruised reed; [Israel] will not quench a dimly burning wick; [Israel] will faithfully bring forth justice."

We are faith descendents of that very same Israel. We are heirs of that same covenant spirit which God spoke into the people of Abraham and Sarah, Ishmael and Jacob and Rachel and Leah, Isaac and Rebecca. We are descendents of that same call to justice, God's call to be a light to the nations, a healing balm to the world. We are called by God to righteousness that transcends whatever the world around us throws at us; to overcome the injustice and trampling heel of the powerful.

Those answering God's call, says Isaiah, will not keep down and oppressed the downtrodden, the bruised reeds of the world. Those answering the call of justice will not demean the poor and powerless, the dimly burning wicks of the world. The justice-seekers of God will not be the ones who lock in the freezers of the world the parrots who deserve justice, not harshness.

In an essay following the tsunami disaster a few years ago, Jeffrey Sachs of Columbia University wrote of the fact that despite the geographical location of this earthquake in the Indian Ocean, the devastation had been felt around the world. Thousands of European tourists were drowned alongside tens of thousands of Asians and Africans. And though he didn't say it in his essay, the waves drowned all people equally – Muslims, Buddhists,

Christians, Hindus, as well as followers of other religious traditions and atheists – no one was left out of the deluge of death and destruction. "A world divided by ethnic and religious disputes suddenly faced its common humanity – and common mortality – in a disaster of shocking geographic reach."

The point of Sachs' essay leads one to understand the reality that disasters such as this hit poor people greater than the rich. "While all of us are vulnerable to the furies of nature – earthquakes, droughts, floods, epidemic diseases, blights and pests – these scourges systematically claim the lives of the poor in vastly greater numbers than they do the rich."

For example, between 1980 and 2002, India experienced fourteen major earthquakes that killed a total of 32,117 people while the United States experienced eighteen major earthquakes that killed only 143 people; the AIDS epidemic is at its height among the poor in sub-Saharan Africa which has just 11% of the world's population but 64% of its AIDS cases and 74% of the world's AIDS deaths; The Sudan and the American Southwest both face the persistence of sustained drought yet among the poor in Sudan death is the outcome while the American rich face only financial loss, not loss of life. A disproportionate share of the deaths caused by such environmental shocks as earthquakes, floods, cyclones, hurricanes, and extreme temperature events are borne by people in developing countries. "What the rich suffer as hardships, the poor world often suffers as mass death."

If we wade in the water with Jesus, we must come out hearing God call us God's children. If we wade in the water with Jesus, we must be washed with the righteousness of God's call to bring justice to the world. If we wade in the water with Jesus we must come out touched by that prophecy which calls us a light to the nations. If we wade in the water with Jesus we must be ready to fulfill Isaiah's prophesy – that God takes us by the hand, calls us to open the eyes of those who cannot see, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, to open the cell doors for those who sit in the

darkness. If we wade in the water with Jesus we must be speakers and doers of God's justice.

"If rich countries continue with business as usual," writes Jeffrey Sachs, "responding generously to [disasters] but failing to address the underlying situation of the world's poor, the world will repeatedly confront the tragic arithmetic of life and death. This is not merely a sound forecast based on the likelihood of future earthquakes, droughts, floods, landslides and epidemic diseases. It also reflects the grim fact that life-and-death disasters of the poor are with us every day."

Much of the world's hardships can be overcome with money – redistributing resources so that we are all taking care of each other – but overcoming injustice is about more than money. As many as 3 million poor children will die of malaria although bed nets and anti-malarial drugs are readily available in rich nations; tens of millions of Bangladeshi citizens are poisoned by natural arsenic in well water while rich nations have the technology to prevent such disaster. Much of what happens to separate the poor from the rich can be addressed with money which is why the Church continually challenges us to wade deeper in the water and make your baptism known around the world.

Yes, we can stop disasters by throwing money at them, but until we change our belief systems to be more in line with the Jesus-system, then we are not solving a thing, we are simply perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty and dependence and resentment and anger that the world has thrived on throughout all of human history.

We cannot be true and faithful followers of Jesus until we can clearly hear and heed and follow what God requires of us "to do justice, and to love kindness and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8). We cannot be true and faithful followers until we can live the anointing of God's presence which is upon us, when we finally know that "God has sent [us] to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the

captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of [Jubilee] ... to comfort all who mourn ... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." (Isaiah 61:1, cf. Luke 4:18-19). We cannot be true and faithful followers of Jesus until we accept the reality which he preaches, that blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst, blessed are the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemakers; and yes, blessed are we all who are persecuted for righteousness sake and reviled because of our faithfulness to God's calling. (Matthew 5: 1-11)

Wade in the water. Roll up your pants legs. Wade in the water. Feel the Spirit of God descend on you. Wade in the water. Be that light to the nations, that healer of your neighbors torment, the freeer of the sinful bonds of this world. Wade in the water. Remember your baptism. And be thankful.

Amen.