

## Here is My Servant

TEXT: Matthew 3:13-17; Isaiah 42:1-9

*Preached by Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on January 8, 2023*

I got an email from a Canadian friend on Thursday night with the subject line “Happy Twelfth Night.” It was a reminder to me that Protestants in the United States hardly know that Epiphany is a thing—let alone one of the three major festivals of the early church. Growing up as a Baptist, it was barely mentioned, and it never really dawned on me that anyone might actually celebrate it until I visited Germany in January of 1979.

Epiphany falls on January 6, 12 days after Christmas--the day you're supposed to get 12 drummers drumming--and the day we commonly remember the arrival of the Wise Men in Bethlehem. In Germany and in some other countries, this is a big event. Children dress up as kings and travel from door to door--much as we do on Halloween--only instead of collecting for themselves, they collect money for the poor, remembering that the wise men brought gifts to the poor Christ child.

Seeing those children out in their costumes was the first contact I had with anybody actually celebrating Epiphany, and it started me wondering if we weren't missing something. Well, the more you look into church history, the more you realize that we are missing a lot of things. Epiphany in the early church was second only to Easter in its importance. The third great feast was Pentecost, another day that has drifted into religious backwaters, especially in Protestant circles.

Even Easter is greatly watered down today. Easter used to be celebrated with an all-night vigil the night before and then the celebration continued on for what was called the "Great 50 Days" ending with a huge blowout on Pentecost. Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost were the focus of the church. As we talked about a few weeks ago, nobody even thought about celebrating Christmas until the fourth century. Jesus' birth was rolled into Epiphany with the Wise Men, but it wasn't seen as deserving of its own separate celebration.

So what's the deal? Or, as one of my seminary professors used to ask, "How come nothing epiphs on Epiphany anymore?" Why was Epiphany so important, and why is it so often an afterthought now?

Because we are so Christmas-focused today, we've pared Epiphany down to the arrival of the Wise Men with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. For the record, they likely arrived in Jerusalem, asking for the King of the Jews, about two years after Jesus' birth. That's why King Herod asks them when the star appeared and then proceeds to slaughter all the boys under two years old.

The Feast of the Holy Innocents honors those children on a variety of days from December 27-January 10, depending on the particular tradition. On that point, we don't have any record outside of the Bible confirming that slaughter happened. Most Bible scholars consider it myth or legend. But what can be confirmed is that such a slaughter would not have been out of character for King Herod the Great. There are plenty of atrocities committed on his orders that history has documented.

So, even if the Massacre of the Innocents did not happen in the way the Bible described, Herod definitely massacred innocents, and having a day to remember and reflect on that is a spiritual exercise worthy of the spirit of Jesus. Especially since it is happening today, even as we sit here.

The word Epiphany means "manifestation" or "revelation." The coming of the Wise Men is celebrated as the time that Jesus as Messiah was revealed to the Gentiles, since they were pagan astrologers who came from the east—likely Babylon, which was the birthplace of both astrology and astronomy around 1830 BCE. The Christmas story is seen to symbolize the spread of the Gospel—first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles; first to the poor, then to the rich; first to the ones who kept the Temple flocks in accordance with Jewish law, then to pagan astrologers, whose occupation the law expressly forbid.

But Epiphany celebrates more than the Wise Men. In the days when Epiphany was a great church feast, it also celebrates the manifestation of Jesus as the Son of God at his baptism and in some circles also the revelation of Jesus in his first miracle—changing the water into wine at Cana. Those three things--the Wise Men, Cana, and the Baptism have historically been all lumped together to symbolize the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

That a baby was born in a manger was completely unimportant compared with the things that proved to the world who that baby was. Jesus' birth would have had no significance if his anointing by God were not revealed in some way. For that reason, John's gospel doesn't talk about Jesus working miracles. Instead of the word, "miracle," John uses the word "sign." The authority given by God to Jesus was revealed in the signs he performed, the divine validation given by a voice and descending dove at his baptism, and through signs in the heavens that could be interpreted by the Gentiles. Epiphany celebrates the first signs that God gave to the world of who Jesus was.

Okay, Anne, but why did we just hear a passage from Isaiah 42? Glad you asked.

One of the prophets that Christians look to as predicting the coming of Jesus is the prophet Isaiah. Beginning with the passage from Isaiah 42 that Sue read earlier, the next ten chapters of the book contain poetry that talks about a special servant of God. In biblical studies, those mentions are known as the "servant songs" and there are four of them. The identity of the servant in those songs is one of the biggest questions in Old Testament scholarship. When I took a class on Isaiah in seminary, it was the topic of my final paper.

Christians almost universally identify the servant as Jesus. We read various pieces of Isaiah's servant songs in both Advent and Lent. If you've sung Handel's Messiah, you have literally sung from the servant songs. Most obviously of all, in Luke 4, when Jesus visits the synagogue back in Nazareth, he reads from Isaiah 42 and then proclaims that the prophecy has been fulfilled in their hearing.

But, for as obvious as it seems to Christians to identify the servant with Jesus, it should be no surprise that Jews see it differently. Isaiah was a Jewish prophet, and the work that bears his name was part of the Hebrew Bible long before it was part of ours.

Not only do Jews not identify the servant as Jesus, they don't even see the servant songs as prophecy about a Messiah at all. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, there were many branches of Judaism that had differing visions of what to expect in a Messiah. None of them were looking for God in the flesh, but all of them were looking for someone with a special anointing from God to rise up and aid Israel in their hour of need. The Hebrew word for "messiah" means, simply, "anointed one." The word for "anointed one" in Greek is "christos."

While some expected a Messiah who would be a prophet like Moses, a priest like Melchizedek, or a king like David; none of them saw the qualities of the servant in Isaiah's songs as being Messiah-like. For Jews, the servant in Isaiah represents not the role of Messiah, but of Israel as a people. The light to the nations in chapter 42 verse 6 is the fulfillment of God's promise to

Abraham, first made in Genesis 12:3, that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

There is a lot of debate among Jews about whether the servant Isaiah is talking about is Israel in exile, Israel in its homeland, Israel in the diaspora, or other distinctions. But what they share is the belief that the servant role—including the suffering of the servant in Isaiah 52-53; the one who is despised and rejected and acquainted with grief, the one who bears our infirmities, knows our sorrows, and is wounded for our transgressions—that description of service is the role God has outlined for God’s people. A messiah will rise up to lead; but it is the people of God who are called to serve, suffer, and bear one another’s burdens, even if they are despised for doing so.

I think their position is worth considering for us as Christians. I think we need our own epiphany about Isaiah’s servant songs. Changing the identity of the servant in Isaiah doesn’t have any bearing on what we believe about the divinity of Jesus; but it could be enormously helpful to us as we try to live faithful lives in today’s extremely difficult times.

Consider this. When we identify the servant in Isaiah with Jesus, we put the job of suffering and carrying burdens and atoning for transgressions all on him. We don’t have to do any of that—Jesus does it on our behalf. Thinking that way can not only lead to both laziness and grandiosity in our spiritual lives, but it can also shake our faith when the trials and suffering of life hit home. Much of popular Christianity boils down to: “Jesus suffered and died so we don’t have to. He has born our grief so we can always be happy. He is a light to the nations, so we can sit back, believe all that, and let life play out around us.”

That is not a faith that helps a single soul on this earth. Not others, not ourselves. And it leads to exactly the abuses and crises in the church that we see around us, both now and historically. There is almost a direct line to the Christian Nationalism and Supremacy that right now is working round the clock to rule the United States and other places around the world with an iron cross. Starting in the very first chapters of Genesis, God is turning the human structures of power on their heads.

Adam’s job from the moment of his creation is to protect and serve the earth. That’s what God’s “dominion” looks like. By Isaiah’s time, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, we have a much fuller description of what that human vocation looks like as well as just how God intended the descendants of Abraham to bless all the families of earth. To carry each other’s burdens, to help the blind see, to set the captives free.

What if we had an epiphany about the identity of Isaiah’s servant? Suppose the reason that Jesus so aptly fits the description is because his life was meant to show us how God wants all of us to live? Epiphany and the church calendar remember Jesus’ baptism today as well. Lots of people wonder why Jesus was baptized; John the Baptist himself was stunned and tried to object. “No, Jesus—I’m not worthy! You should be baptizing me!”

If Jesus had a different kind of mission, maybe that would be the case. But Jesus is showing the servant’s way; the way he would ask his followers to adopt. Become a part of the covenant, accept the sign, take up the role. It is going to take more than just me to do this work; but I am part of it in the same way you are. I am not claiming special privilege or status. John will baptize me, just like he is baptizing all of you. And the heavens opened in response.

During Advent, we looked in depth at three titles for Jesus—Son of Man, Son of David, and Son of God. Suppose Jesus is identified with Isaiah’s servant in his role, not as Son of God, or Son of David, but as Son of Man—the fully human Jesus. It was the title he always used for himself. Suppose Jesus picked up the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue in Nazareth to say—“Yeah, this. I’m

doing this. We're all doing this. The first shall be last, if you want to live you have to die first, and along the way you have to wash a lot of feet.”

What if we kicked the nonsense of the Prosperity Gospel to the curb and put Isaiah's servant songs in its place? If our wealth and comfort is a sign of God's blessing, that means the poor and suffering are cursed. That is anti-gospel; anti-Christ. What if we experienced our own suffering an opportunity for God's light to shine through the prism of our brokenness. Suppose we saw those imprisoned by debt, racism, and bigotry and remembered that the job of God's servant is to help set them free, and to help those blinded by hate to find a new kind of sight?

Epiphany begins with the light of a star and ends with the light to the nations. Providing the star was something only God could do. But both Isaiah and Jesus make it clear that shining the light to the nations is our job. Amen.