

January 11, 2026 – Isaiah 42:1-9 & Matthew 3:13-17

*“Behold my servant.”* That's an interesting way to start a prophecy, isn't it? I mean, Isaiah is writing 700 years before the birth of Christ. And yet he says, *“Behold my servant.”* Take a look at him. Oh, he won't be born for hundreds and hundreds of years. You can't actually see him. But look at him anyway.

And then, he shows him to us. He shows him to us with such clarity that we might wonder if Isaiah is actually looking at Jesus at that very moment. As if God actually shows Isaiah the entire life of Christ and says, “Here, write down everything that you behold about this person, My Anointed One. My Servant. My Son. So that they can behold him too.”

For when you read Isaiah, you get a view of Christ that is at least as clear as anything we read in the Gospels. I say, “at least as clear” because in some ways, Isaiah's view is even clearer. Isaiah sees Jesus only as God the Father sees him. He sees Jesus with a perfect view of His mission and ministry. And then he relays that perfect understanding of Jesus' mission and ministry to us.

He shows us Christ. *“Behold my servant... whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”* It's a rather understated way of showing us someone who is obviously very, very important. God wants us to see His Son the way that He does. And it's not with thunder. Not with spectacle. Not with a list of accomplishments. But with delight. With love.

That alone already helps us understand what we're seeing at the Jordan River. When Jesus steps into the water to be baptized by John, the heavens open, the Spirit descends, and the voice of the Father declares, *“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”* Isaiah 42 is being spoken all over again. The Father reiterates at Jesus' baptism what He had already declared through the prophet: this is the One in whom My soul delights. This is my chosen one.

Which means Jesus is not self-appointed. He is not a religious innovator. He is not merely a moral teacher. He is the Servant of the Lord, upheld by God Himself. Chosen by the Lord. Anointed by the Holy Spirit.

*“I have put my Spirit upon him,”* the Lord says. The Baptism of our Lord is not the beginning of Jesus' ministry because He lacked something before. It is the public unveiling of who He already is. Who he was born to be: the Anointed One. The Christ. Set apart and sent by the Father.

Isaiah then tells us what kind of Christ this Anointed One will be. *“He will bring forth justice to the nations.”* That word “justice” is easily misunderstood. We hear it and think first of punishment, of judgment, of the settling of accounts. But Isaiah shows us that the justice of the Servant is about restoring what has gone wrong. This is a justice that isn't simply interested in crushing evil. It's interested in making things right again.

How do we know? Because Isaiah immediately tells us how the Servant exercises His mission. *“He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.”* The Messiah isn't a showman. He doesn't force Himself upon the world. He doesn't rule by intimidation. The Kingdom He brings doesn't arrive by shouting people into submission.

He brings justice, but he does so with amazing gentleness. *“A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”* A bruised reed is already damaged. It's bent, weak, and close to useless. A faintly burning wick gives little light and is easily blown out. It has one job, to give light to the room, but it doesn't do it very well.

These are images of sinful human frailty. Lives twisted by our own corrupt desires. Faith that is all but snuffed out by doubt and idolatry. Consciences weighed down by guilt and fear and shame. And, frankly, a bruised reed is a pretty useless thing to hold onto. Just throw it into the fire. A faintly burning wick is a wick you replace. You don't keep protecting it from going out.

I hate to say it, but this is how God sees sinful human beings. We're damaged goods. Defective products. Bruised reeds and faint wicks that it would make much more sense to simply dispose of and replace with something better.

But he doesn't. Isaiah tells us that the Christ does not come to finish us off. He does not snap the reed. He does not extinguish the flame. He comes precisely for those who are already bruised and smoldering.

And so when He steps into the Jordan, He's not identifying Himself with the strong, the righteous, or the spiritually impressive. He's identifying Himself with sinners. With those who come to John confessing their sins and receiving a baptism of repentance.

Jesus comes to the Jordan not because he is a bruised reed or a dim wick, but because he has come to save bruised reeds and dim wicks. Jesus is placing Himself where He intends to remain: among sinners, for sinners, in order to save sinners.

Christ comes in gentleness for sinners, but the gentleness of Christ does not mean weakness or failure. Isaiah writes, "*He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth.*" The Servant who doesn't break the reed is the same Servant whose spirit will not be broken. He doesn't give up, ever. He doesn't abandon His mission, ever. He doesn't lose heart when opposed, rejected, or crucified. Ever.

His compassion isn't weakness. His suffering isn't defeat. Isaiah teaches us that beneath the gentleness of Jesus is an unshakable resolve. He will accomplish what the Father has sent Him to do. The justice He brings will be established, even if it means passing through death itself to get there. That isn't weakness or failure. That is strength and perseverance and hope beyond the like of sinful man.

And it is a work that is supported and upheld by the Father's will. "*I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you.*" And the Lord Himself promises to guard and uphold His Servant. The mission of Christ was never precarious. It never depended on human cooperation for its success. God Himself ensured that the work of salvation would be carried through to completion.

And what is that work? "*I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations.*" Christ doesn't merely communicate a covenant or shine a light. He is the covenant in flesh and blood. He is the light that shines not only on Israel, but on the nations, on Gentiles, on the ends of the earth. His very presence on earth is the fulfillment of God's promises.

That matters profoundly for the Baptism of our Lord, because baptism is where Christ continues to give Himself as covenant and light. The same Spirit who descends upon Jesus at the Jordan is the Spirit who is poured out in our baptism. The same Servant who stands in the water for sinners now joins sinners to Himself through water and the Word. Because Christ is baptized, we have a covenant with God through baptism. Because Jesus is baptized, we see His light in the darkness.

Because Jesus is baptized, our eyes, blinded by sin, are opened and we are released from our slavery to sin and death. Sin is not just bad behavior. It is blindness and imprisonment. And Christ's work is not merely instruction to make us better people. It is deliverance from sin and death, through the covenant of grace made when we ourselves are baptized in his name.

At Jesus' baptism, we hear that the heavens are opened. And that wording isn't coincidental. It is the visible sign that this is the One who opens what has been closed. He opens heaven. He opens blind eyes. He opens prison doors. Because heaven was opened when Jesus was baptized, heaven is opened for us when we are baptized.

Isaiah ends with the Lord declaring, "*Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare.*" In Christ, something genuinely new has arrived. Not a new law. Not a new demand. But a new creation, created by the Servant who enters the water, bears sin, receives the Spirit, and goes forth to save.

Isaiah teaches us to look at Jesus and see not merely a miracle-worker or moral example, but the Servant of the Lord: gentle with sinners, steadfast in His mission, anointed by the Spirit, given as a covenant, and sent to bring light, justice, and salvation.

And in baptism, that Servant is given to you. The delight the Father has in His Son is spoken over you in Christ. The Spirit who rests upon Jesus is poured out upon you. The justice He establishes becomes your righteousness. The light He brings becomes your life.

*“Behold my servant,”* the Lord says. And in beholding Him, we learn not only who Jesus is, but who we are in Him: forgiven, restored, set free, and baptized into the One in whom God is well pleased. So that, in Him, God looks at each one of you and declares that you are a beloved son or daughter of the Lord. Amen.