

“Righteous Spirit”

Sermon – January 11, 2026 Stone Presbyterian Church

19th century Baptist-Calvinist English preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote, “The greatest enemy to human souls is the self-righteous spirit which makes men look to themselves for salvation.”

You couldn’t ask for a better definition of a self-righteous spirit: when you look to yourself for salvation. Typically, we think of this being accompanied by arrogance, pride, and judgmental condemnation of others. And we see this in painful abundance today. So much so that I cannot even watch the news anymore because of all the lives affected so negatively by it and yet the behavior goes completely unchecked.

More insidiously is that it has become culturally acceptable or at least tolerated. Thus, this self-righteous spirit becomes an indictment not just against individuals but against us as a society.

And that is really what today’s scripture passages are addressing.

As Christians, we often interpret Old Testament prophecy through the lens of Christ. Today’s passage from Isaiah 42 is an example. Verse 1 begins the passage, “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.”

We often see this as speaking about Jesus. And, indeed, we hear echoes of this in today’s gospel lesson Matthew 3:16-17 when after Jesus had been baptized “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’”

Certainly, we see Jesus as a “Servant of the Lord.” But the concern is when we see it all about *him*, that we have no responsibility but to sit back, simply tell others, “Jesus is Lord”, and go about our business.

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Despite our Christ-colored glasses, what is striking about Isaiah 42:1-9 is that “the Servant” is never clearly identified. What is emphasized is the activity and character of the Servant. It seems that Yahweh (the LORD) is interested more in what is accomplished rather than who does so. Yahweh's main concern is for his just and righteous purposes for the nations.

As verse 6 begins, “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness.”

It is clear Yahweh is not merely concerned about what is accomplished for the sake of his plan, but the manner in which ministry is conducted. Verses 2 and 3 make it clear that justice is not to be accomplished through force but through meekness.

The servant’s acceptance of his situation without either complaint or recrimination is presented as an example of how he “brings forth justice.”

With perhaps a more Jewish eye, you can interpret this passage talking about Israel as “the Servant.” Isaiah chapters 40-55 take place during the Babylonian exile when the followers of Yahweh are at their lowest. Indeed, they no longer have a country.

And yet, there is this message of hope that a future Servant will bring light and justice to all the nations. The implication is that Israel as a whole will be this beacon of light and all nations will come to it, not at the point of a weapon, but with the promise of justice.

And note that the reassurance Isaiah offers is not said in triumph. There is no talk of revenge, of turning the tables on the Babylonians, no “let’s kick butt and take names.”

If this servant poem has any links with the Christian message, it is by way of a new understanding of the meaning and purpose of God’s covenant with Israel, the descendants of Jacob. The link is less with Jesus himself than with his message.

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The remarkable thing we see in this Isaiah passage is how the people who have been traumatized are called not to do the typical human thing of hunkering down and closing ranks.

Nationalism quite often tends to be a natural consequence of collective trauma, which we see today in our own country. It would be so easy to find in these texts what scholar Edward Said says could be “an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you”

However, in Isaiah 42, the prophet offers a vision of the world in which an individual or a group of people in the midst of brokenness, in spite of brokenness, and maybe even because of the brokenness, will be a light to the nations.

Given the ambiguous nature of “the Servant”, we might then venture some sort of communal/individual tension within the interpretation of the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3.

On one level, Matthew is clearly presenting a narrative about an individual. Jesus is baptized. He is the Beloved, God’s son, the one in whom God is well pleased.

On another (theological) level, we as Christians are invited to see ourselves in this baptism experience, to see the Christian community as baptized like Jesus into faith, into the beloved community. We are together the daughters and sons of God. God is well pleased with us.

But we—as a community—also participate in this work of justice together as communities of faith. We are God’s servants to the world as churches, not just as individuals. We participate in God’s new thing, God’s new exodus out of exile and brokenness. God’s community is God’s servant.

To be clear this power to do so belongs to God and does not come from us.

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To paraphrase Isaiah, we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.

Even in the midst of the direst of circumstances, we still have the power to make a difference in the lives of the people around us through the power of the Holy Spirit working through us.

Today’s passage from Acts 10, warns us, though, of the self-deception that self-righteousness can cause.

Today’s passage is the conclusion of a story that had God telling Peter in a vision that essentially it was faith that made you a follower not religious practices like what kind of food you ate.

Peter then is forced to meet up with not only a Gentile but a Roman centurion named Cornelius, an enemy of Israel.

As we read in Acts, Peter was apparently fine with admitting a few outsiders as token Gentiles but was wary of admitting such a large number that would have radically and irreversibly altered the ethnic composition of the church. It must have seemed to him like an invasion.

The shocking image likely raised many questions for Peter. Can the church admit so many others and still remain Jewish? How would such a scenario impact the ethnic makeup and purity of the church?

But as the story makes it clear, Peter does not get to decide who is included in the church or how many. God does not believe in tokenisms.

We see that in this case God did not even wait for baptism for the Holy Spirit to come upon them—just hearing the word and their desire to become followers of Christ was sufficient.

In fact, God may have done so to force Peter’s hand in case he or any of his companions had any lingering doubts. As Peter says in verse 47, “Can

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anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”

Peter’s initial dilemma is followed by full embrace of Gentiles and highlights the possibility that people can overcome their fears of the other and envision an expansive community. All this was possible because of Peter’s willingness to unlearn and an ability to turn a nightmare into a transformative vision.

The church today needs that kind of imagination that would allow it to turn fears about “the other” into generative possibilities for a new future.

Today’s passages invite us to reflect on the communal nature of Jesus’ baptism along with our own. It calls us to reflect on communities who have nurtured our faith journeys and the ways we are called to support others as the body of Christ.

Jesus tells John he needs to be baptized “to fulfill all righteousness.” That is, to act in obedience to God in a way that harmonizes internal dispositions and external action. Jesus’ first steps in public ministry are a combination of a willing spirit and a powerful, public display of his obedience to God’s call.

With our baptism we are called to do the same. We are baptized with Christ and into Christ, so that God’s plan of righteousness might be fulfilled in us and through us with unrelenting humility, compassion, and patience.

So, go forth with a righteous spirit, having been baptized in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.