

## Isaiah 42:1-9

Today's reading is a lovely one for Advent: addressed to a long-suffering people, it raises the prospect of a servant of God who will enter the scene gently and bring light and liberation. Jesus quotes from this passage in his inaugural appearance at his home synagogue in Luke's gospel, identifying himself with that servant who has been filled with God's spirit, and Christians have always seen Jesus in this passage. But I think we will get even more out of it if we pause to think about its original context first.

This text probably comes from late in the Babylonian Exile. The audience has been in exile for at least a generation, maybe more, and although we know it's nearing the end, they do not know that. For all they know, they'll never get to go home . . . and for many of them, Judea isn't home, really. They've grown up in Babylon. Children have been given Jewish names, but they speak the language of Babylon and play the games of Babylon. Their idea of divine power, though they may have been taught about the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has to have been influenced by those human-headed lions you see in Babylonian iconography, that stand at the entry to the city walls. The children have to have been influenced by the Babylonian creation story that tells them that after a bloody war among the gods that generated the earth and the heavens, the winner made human beings as slaves of the gods. And for all the cruelty of Babylonian institutions, you've got to figure that the exiles found friends among the people there. It's just the nature of things. There are going to be good neighbors and friendly shopkeepers and artisans who make beautiful things and you want to get to know more about them. So I imagine the context in which Isaiah's words drop as one of muted sadness and resignation, some chronic distress at what's being lost gradually and inexorably, and at the

same time a certain reluctant appreciation for the grace that is to be found in this foreign land.

“Here is my servant,” God announces through Isaiah, “who will bring forth justice *to the nations.*” God’s servants, notably the judges and certain good kings, used to bring justice to the children of Abraham. Now the scope has widened to “the nations,” perhaps because we’re now living among the nations and we’ve begun to suspect they’re children of God too. This servant, in whom God delights, will go about his work gently. Unlike the judges and certain good kings, he will establish justice by *not* using violence and coercion. In fact, where people are already bruised or barely hanging on, the servant will not aggravate their injuries.

This sounds like an awesome rescuer. But then a few verses later, God says, “I have called *you* . . . I have given *you* as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations.” The spirit-filled servant is Israel itself. The people who have been traumatized are going to rise above their injury. They are not going to pass on their trauma; they’re going to transform it by reaching out in love. Is this because they’d done such a great job of establishing justice back home? No—in fact, the predominant interpretation of their current situation is that it’s punishment for their unfaithfulness in Judah. But you can see a new thought beginning to take the place of that one: we’re not here as punishment; we’re here to be a light to the nations! And how could we possibly have the confidence that we can do that? Because God is the one behind this whole project, God “who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it.”

Now, this is interesting at this moment for us. The Christian right, growing since the 1980s, has taken a turn toward white Christian nationalism, which I think we’d all identify as idolatrous and unAmerican. But it has. And why? Almost assuredly because in part of

demographic changes such that the US is no longer a majority white country. The people who feel threatened by that are white and identify as Christian, and they want to reverse the trend. The courts are deciding religious liberty cases in ways that favor conservative Christians—if the Washington state high school football coach who prayed with his team had been a Muslim, I don't think the court would have decided in his favor. That's just one example of the massive backlash against diversity that has seized our country and the most visible representatives of Christianity.

I think the white Christian nationalists feel that they are on their way to exile, or perhaps in exile already. They saw America as a city on a hill, the new Jerusalem, established by God as a light to the nations, resplendent in its prosperity and strength. They did not see or consider important the way that this America was possible only by costing red and brown and black people, by costing LGBTQ people, at a cost even to cis women and people with disabilities and everyone who doesn't fit a pretty specific mold. If the only America in which you can thrive is that one, built on violence, you will claw it back savagely with more violence.

In a recent interview, Eboo Patel talked with Robert P. Jones, founder of the Public Religion Research Institute about how religious pluralism could overcome polarization.<sup>i</sup> Speaking of that public school coach who prayed with his team, Patel said that he didn't want to eliminate all religious behavior in public, precisely because some religious behavior is done for the common good, like building hospitals or development corporations. What he wants to do, rather, is not only eliminate coercive religious behavior but nurture inclusive religious behavior. They talked about the Ku Klux Klan as a reaction against not only people of color but also immigrants, Jews and Catholics, and how the religious establishment of the 1920s came up

with the concept of “Judeo-Christian” to create a category in which “all of us” belonged. We have to do something similar now, to widen the category of “us” to include people who read the Quran or the Bhagavad Gita or the Dhammapada. Patel and Jones both insist that you cannot simply do away with the old exclusive paradigms, but you have to also build new, inclusive ones. As Patel says in his book, *We Need to Build*,

The goal of social change work is not a more ferocious revolution; it is a more beautiful social order. It is harder to organize a fair trial than it is to fire up a crowd, more challenging to build a good school than it is to tell others they are doing education all wrong. But every decent society requires fair trials and good schools, and that’s just the beginning of the list of institutions and structures that need to be efficiently created and effectively run in large-scale diverse democracy.<sup>ii</sup>

What they are talking about is religious leaders, religious communities, helping white Christians look with love at their exile neighbors. I am not saying that white Christian nationalists are God’s light to the nations. I’m saying that people of faith who can help each other see diversity as “more neighbors!” rather than “scary replacements” are God’s light to the nations. And it cannot be done coercively; it can only be done gently, invitingly, but from a place of inner strength.

The lecture on science and Buddhism last month would be one instance of that—engaging an adherent of a minority religion on shared ground. But it also occurs to me this Advent season, as outdoor creches go up and there’s the annual struggle over public celebrations of one religion’s holiday, that we as Christians could look up when some major holidays of other faiths are coming up, and see if we can support public celebrations of those as well. I mean, it’s a very small gesture, but if we knew that Hindus were going to celebrate Diwali, the festival of lights, last month, could we have co-hosted a little fireworks display in a

park with a Hindu congregation? Or put an ad in the paper wishing blessings to our Muslim neighbors when Eid al-Adha comes around? When my world religions class was studying Sikhi, and learned about the *langar*, the free meal, one of my Muslim students commented that during Ramadan last year his congregation offered free meals every night, and my whole class of mostly small-town white kids went, “aww!” because they were impressed and touched.

We look to Jesus to be the servant of God who brings justice to the nations. But he comes to us, as Mairi has been pointing out, as somebody very small and vulnerable who gets *us* to act generously, gently, tenderly. And when he grows up, his whole MO is to teach *us* to bring justice to the nations by our words and our actions and our very way of being in the world. Is this a wild fantasy? Yes, because it’s wild; but No, because God is commissioning us: “the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.”

God of light, you sent a savior into the world to bring justice and release to all who are in bondage. Shine this light upon us, and show us how to bring justice and peace to all who suffer. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/eboo-patel-podcast-Jones/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.amazon.com/We-Need-Build-Diverse-Democracy-ebook/dp/B096DM6X1Y>