

“Equipped for Mission”

Introduction: Embedded within the magisterial work of the prophet Isaiah we find a collection of what are called servant songs. There are four of them (Isa. 42, 49, 50, 53), each of which anticipates the ministry of Jesus. The first, which we will hear in just a minute, speaks of a figure in whom the Father delights and will anoint with his Spirit. The job description of this Servant is described as bringing justice to the nations in a way that is gentle, faithful, and persistent: “A bruised reed he will not break . . . In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth” (42:4).

I find that I particularly appreciate the phrase “not falter or be discouraged,” as there is so much these days that is discouraging and that can cause us to falter. But Jesus, we are promised, will not. Why not? Because, as we will hear in our gospel text, he is equipped for his mission by both the Spirit and the Father. He is empowered by the presence of the Spirit and affirmed by the love of the Father and empowered by the presence of the Spirit. Let’s listen to our texts and then consider this equipping of Jesus and how it helps us understand how we are equipped to carry on his mission.

I. Down by the River Jordan

A. We said last week when we explored the childhood of Jesus that in the thirty years between his infancy and the beginning of his adult ministry, only one account of his childhood was recorded by any of the gospel writers (Luke:2:41-52). The “hidden years” some have called this thirty-year period. But, with the arrival of John the Baptist down by the river Jordan, all of that changes as Jesus steps into the spotlight with a rich and full three-year ministry. John has been preparing the people for the coming of Jesus by encouraging them to repent of their sin and receive a baptism as an outward sign of such repentance. John was dressed in the prophetic garb that made people remember the prophet Elijah, whose return was to anticipate the coming of the Messiah, the one God had promised to send to restore all things. That coming of Elijah was foretold in the mid-5th c. B.C. by the prophet Malachi (4:5-6), whose prophetic work followed the return from exile in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. But since then, God hadn’t really said much. Until now. Now, John was looking and sounding a lot like Elijah. Later, Jesus would actually reveal that John was the Elijah who was to come (Ma. 11:14).

B. For now, Jesus simply recognized the preaching of John as the Father’s call to action and so he made his way down to where John was working. Imagine, however, John’s surprise when he looked up and there, in a long line of those who had streamed out to the desert to declare their desire to be cleansed, standing knee deep in the muddy waters of the Jordan, was Jesus, waiting his turn to be baptized! Perhaps it might have been a little like standing in the front of our sanctuary, serving communion to those who had made their way forward, appearing in front of you. Wait, that’s not right, you might be inclined to think. That wasn’t in the deacon training manual! If anything, he should be serving you! That’s, in effect, what John said to Jesus. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

C. The question is, if John’s baptism had to do with repentance, what is Jesus, who was without sin and had nothing to repent of, doing? Some have humorously suggested that his mother made him do it! But she, of course, didn’t have that kind of control over him. Better to consider how Jesus

responded to John: “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Last week we considered how closely Jesus, born as an infant and raised in Nazareth, identified with us as human beings. That identity we see now goes as far as standing with us, knee deep in our sin, so that he might take it on himself and take it away, as he goes to the cross, clothing us in his righteousness. This is how he will make things right again. Paul, in his second letter to the church in Corinth, parses this out: “God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

D. Think, for a moment, what that reveals about the character of Jesus. As we’ll consider next week, his baptism is followed by a time of testing, or temptation by Satan, in the wilderness. But we could say that he had already faced a temptation before his baptism. And that temptation was to not set aside his divinity, but to act like the superior, more powerful being that he was. After all, John had declared that he wasn’t even worthy to stoop down and untie the sandals of this Jesus. But Jesus set his own ego aside, took his own sandals off, and waded into that water to identify intimately with us. This is a leader we can trust, follow, and maybe even fall in love with!

II. Equipment for the Mission

A. Now, taking on the sin of the world is certainly a tall order! Making the mess we as human beings have made of the world just and right again is a mission that would certainly wear one down and burn one out! But Isaiah declares that our Servant King will not falter or be discouraged! Why not? Two things happen, following his baptism, both anticipated by Isaiah’s first servant song, that would enable Jesus to undertake and complete his mission.

1. The first thing to happen was the descent upon Jesus of something like a dove. Whatever this actually was, it indicated the filling of Jesus with the Spirit of God’s empowering presence. Peter speaks of the effects of this filling, recorded later in the book of Acts (10:37-38):

You know what happened all through Judea, beginning in Galilee after John the Baptist began preaching. And no doubt you know that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. Then Jesus went around doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the Devil, for God was with him.

Jesus did not falter or get discouraged because as he was going around and making things just and right, the greatest power there is – the power of the Holy Spirit – was working through him. He would never run down or burn out.

2. But not just power; also love. Jesus also ministered out of the depth of love that the Father had for him. He realizes this when the second thing happens – a voice from heaven is heard. And this voice declares: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” Noteworthy here is that as far as his mission was concerned, Jesus hadn’t done anything yet. But the Father affirmed that he loved his Son anyway. So Jesus learned from the get go that he wouldn’t have to earn his Father’s love but could simply minister from the gift that it was.

Does that, it is worth asking, really make a difference? Think about the various ways we seek to carve out our identity. We can do so through the affirmation or love of another, such as a spouse, parent, or child. Or we can seek our identity through achieving success of some kind, at work or through some other accomplishment. Or we can seek to carve out an identity through excluding others in some way,

thinking of them as bad and us, therefore, as good. In fact, all of these will lead us to falter or become discouraged. Those who say they love us will do so imperfectly and fall short of our need. The need to succeed leaves us vulnerable to our own failures or worn out by the constant pressure to perform. Excluding others to make ourselves feel good ignores the love of neighbor, and of our enemy, to which Jesus calls us in order to live a fully human life. The only identity that will sustain us and not be subject to what others think of us or what we think of ourselves is the identity that comes through faith in the one who stood in the waters of baptism with us. It's based on the unconditional love of this one that declares we're accepted and loved based not on what we've done or think of ourselves. but on what he's done and what he thinks of us.

Doesn't that make all the difference in the world? How much more secure, how much more confident, how much more free to love and serve are you when you know you are loved without having to prove it or earn it?

B. These two pieces of equipment – the empowering presence of the Spirit and the affirming word of the Father – would be vital to the mission of the Son. Both are anticipated in the first servant song as he's given his job description to pursue justice and righteousness: The word of the delight of the Lord in the servant, and the anointing of the Servant by the Spirit. And both enable him to complete his mission without faltering or becoming discouraged. How about us? What keeps you from faltering or becoming discouraged when so much around us could easily lead us down that path?

C. Know that both the power of the Spirit and the love of the Father are gifts God knows we need and wants to give us as we head out into the world, continuing his mission of seeking justice and righteousness as the body of Christ. So maybe the question to ask is: How do we tap into and live from these gifts? It seems to begin with prayer. Notice how Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus helps us see how Jesus received these gifts. Matthew says: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened . . ." Luke says: "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened . . ." (Lk. 3:21).

Luke's account looks back at the event and reveals to us that when he came up out of the water Jesus spent at least some time praying, and it was *while he was praying* that the Spirit and the Father filled him with their power and love. Therefore, it's not surprising that in the days leading up to Pentecost the followers of Jesus waited for the Spirit to move by spending time in prayer. Now there are all sorts of ways to pray, and there is no guaranteed formula to follow, but it certainly seems that prayer is a way, especially as we pray while meditating on the word that the Spirit inspired, that we can open ourselves to the Spirit's power, his guidance, and the assurance of love that he brings.

So, wherever we might be inclined to falter or be discouraged, let us be people of prayer. As we do so, may the strength of the Spirit and the affirmation of the Father fill us, that we might keep on participating in the mission of the Son to the world.