“***To Fulfill All Righteousness***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Jan. 12, 2019

**Isaiah 42:1–7**

1Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him. . . 2 He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; 3 a bruised reed he will not break. . . 4 He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth. 5 Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it:

6I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

**Matthew 3:13–17**

13Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. 16And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

There is a lot in these two Bible passages. First I want to zero in on the mystery that I see in the Matthew passage. It’s where Jesus says “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (3:15). What does that mean? He doesn’t say, “I’m getting baptized for the same reason as everybody else, because I need to repent from sin,” because that was not the case, and John knew it. Jesus didn’t need the baptism of repentance. In fact, his remark is not about *his* needs at all. It is about the social meaning of what John is doing. More than that, it is about where they stand in the history of religious development. It is the righteousness of what *John* represents that they are fulfilling.

John is the last of the line of Hebrew prophets. His baptizing of the Messiah marks the turn of ages from the epoch of prophets to the epoch of the Messiah. John and Jesus are *fulfilling* the righteousness of the prophets and letting it culminate in the Messiah, who was also a prophet, and much more.

When Jesus submits to John’s baptism, he is respecting the appropriate sequence of religious development. By respecting John, Jesus is honoring the whole prophetic line. That’s the correct *timing*. It is *proper* to uplift John’s ministry, and to show how even the Messiah emerges under the auspices of the prophets. In fact, Jesus’ movement emerges from John’s. He inherited his four principle disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—from the Baptizer. They were initially *John’s* disciples, and they began following Jesus after John was arrested.

There is no better example of the teachings of the prophetic line than the prophet that scholars refer to as Second Isaiah, who uses the image of the Servant of the Lord. The Servant is the ideal of what Israel should be. Israel should be loyal, strong, should “not grow faint or be crushed” (42:4). Then God says “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon” (vv. 6–7). In other words, the Jews will enlighten the Gentiles, so that spiritually blind people will begin to understand God. Further on, Second Isaiah says God will magnify the Servant’s “teaching and make it glorious. . . Bring forth the people who are blind” (42:21; 43:8). It is *God’s* light and teaching that shines behind the light and the teaching of the Jews. It’s God revealing Godself to human beings, freeing them from idols.

We can look back now and say that it was Jesus, Paul, and the early Christians who enlightened the Gentiles, opened eyes that were spiritually blind, and magnified the teaching about God’s love. We could also say that Jesus was the ideal Servant of the Lord. God’s glory culminates both of these passages: the glory of God opening eyes and freeing people, and then the glory of God speaking aloud after the baptism of Jesus.

“As he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove”; then “a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased’” (3:16–17). God proclaims the divine Sonship of Jesus while the latter partakes of the prophet’s baptizing. And this marks the beginning of Jesus’ own public career. Both historically and visually, we see the Messiah emerging from the work of the last prophet, and God the Father affirming him as his own Son. This is the culmination of the one age, and the beginning of another. The very heavens open up to mark this moment—the turn of ages. As the harvest can only happen when the grain has had time to ripen, so the Messianic revelation could only happen at this time, when John had done his work, arousing the conscience and the hope of the Jewish people.

Jesus fulfilled the promise that the Servant would “open the eyes that are blind, to bring out . . . from the prison those who sit in darkness” (v. 7), sometimes literally (as when he healed the blind), and sometimes figuratively (as when he freed people from ritual systems that would control their lives). When he said “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27), his intention was to free people from nervousness about violating ritual rules. When he said “the truth will make you free” (John 8:32), he was freeing people from the fear of God, and anxiety about impurity and sin God.

Jesus liberates people from the *spiritual* captivity they create for themselves through stifling ritual and dogmas, most of which are man-made. We tend to get stuck in our thinking and our beliefs. He knows that about us, and he feels for us. Our stuckness may come from fear, and fear comes from not really knowing God. Jesus helps us to know God. When he speaks of “my Father and your Father” (John 20:17), he is calling us to experience *closeness* to God. We can now talk to God without being afraid.

He can ease our way into society, and free us from sadness or loneliness. He restores our self-respect. He gives meaning to our life, and thus liberates us from physical addictions or anxiety patterns.

Then, of course, there’s a peculiar form of bondage whenever we get cocky about our faith, arrogant, or judgmental, and we need him to free us *that*. Jesus is the jailbreaker who can spring all of those mental traps and set us free.

With freedom, of course, comes responsibility. We can’t be a light for the Gentiles—or for anyone—if we are hard-hearted, power-hungry, or vengeful. Remember the Servant of the Lord was gentle; he would not “lift up his voice” or break “a bruised reed” (Isa 42:2–3). And yet, he also would not “grow faint . . . until he has established justice in the earth” (42:4). The Servant of the Lord is gentle as a breeze, and powerful as lightning. He fulfills the prophetic hope, shows us freedom, and leads us into spiritual maturity. We can be close to God now, in our daily walk. I, for one, am glad not to be afraid of God any more.

Now I want to ask you: Do *you* take the message in, and make it your own? Do you find you can face the unknown more serenely if you are confident about God? I hope you feel loved, and full of life. With renewed energy, you will be able to weather the storms that life brings, supported by a knowledge of God through Jesus.