

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series that I am calling “The gospel according to Isaiah” which will take us through much of the Old Testament book of Isaiah. Isaiah was what was known as a covenant mediator prophet, people who were called by God to be His spokesperson, to call out the sin of the nation and call them to repent of their sin and return to faithfulness to the covenant that God had made with them at Mt. Sinai, after He had led them out of Egypt. Isaiah prophesied to Judah, the southern part of Israel, from about 740-687 BC. The book of Isaiah can be broken up into two parts. Chapters 1-39 are mainly about God’s judgment of Israel and the surrounding nations for their sins. Chapters 40-66 are mainly about the restoration God will bring to His people once their time of discipline is completed. Earlier in this series, we looked at the three main areas where God through Isaiah was calling the Israelites out for breaking the covenant, areas that we also need God’s exhortation today: Judah’s injustice, their mistreatment of the poor and oppressed, their empty worship, their performative religion, and their idolatry, specifically the ways they were trusting in other nations for their protection and security instead of putting their trust in God.

But in chapter 40, the prophecy shifts from a focus on judgment to a focus on restoration. God lets them know that their time of discipline is over, that the time of restoration has begun. He reminds them that He is always with them, and that He is stronger than the nations who have them captive. And in Isaiah 42:1-13, God gives them an even greater answer to their rebellion and exile.

Isaiah 42:1–13 - “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.” ⁵ This is what God the **Lord says**— the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out, who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it: ⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, ⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. ⁸ “I am the Lord; **that is my name!** I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you.” ¹⁰ Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them. ¹¹ Let the wilderness and its towns raise their voices; let the

settlements where Kedar lives rejoice. Let the people of Sela sing for joy; let them shout **from the mountaintops**.¹² Let them give glory to the Lord and proclaim his praise in the islands.¹³ The Lord will march out like a champion, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.

Remember that Isaiah words are addressed to Israel when they are in exile, slaves in Babylon, while their cities lie in ruin. Isaiah 40 and beyond are words of hope and restoration to a people in captivity for their rebellious sin against God. But in Isaiah 42, God through Isaiah introduces a character who will known as “The servant of the Lord” and makes some bold promises about this character. In fact, there will be four “servant songs,” passages about this character – Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 52-53.

So who is the servant who God loves, delights in, and has put his Spirit on?

Isaiah 42:1–4 - “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

This servant seems to have a paradoxical mission. On the one hand, his mission and calling are cosmic, worldwide in scope. He will bring justice to the nations. He will establish justice on earth. This is language fit for a king, one who can establish justice in his kingdom, which in this case is the whole earth. What is justice, mishpat? There is justice when people are treated equitably, when there is impartiality and honesty, when the vulnerable are protected, when the guilty are punished, and when every relationship and system is working together in harmony. This is what the servant has come to establish. He will bring justice to the nations. He will establish justice on earth. And the islands – the distant lands – will put their hope in him. In verse 6, he says, “I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” And as another servant song puts it:

Isaiah 49:5–6 - And now the Lord says— he who formed me in the womb to be his servant to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the Lord and my God has been my strength—⁶ he says: “It

is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”

So this servant will have a ministry, a kingdom, that is cosmic in scope, establishing justice in his realm, which will fill the whole world.

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And yet, look carefully at the methods by which he will achieve this justice. Do you see any reference to power, to control, to domination? No - he will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets. He will not seek attention for himself, or use power or control to establish his reign of justice. He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not snuff out a smoldering wick. What incredible imagery. A bruised reed in the Hebrew is one that is so broken that it will not be straight again. And the smoldering wick is so close to extinction that it will not light again. Isaiah is painting a picture of two seemingly hopeless causes, two wounded figures. But for this servant, no case is so hopeless that he can not redeem it. He will treat even the most bruised reed with gentleness, to bring healing. He will restore the light and flame to even the most smoldering wick. No reed will be so bent and cracked that He can not straighten it. No wick is so close to extinction that He can not restore its light, its flame. The implication is that there is no individual so broken, so wounded, so lost in darkness that He can not gently restore and heal.

So, in this servant figure, you have what seems to be an apparent contradiction. This individual will be a kingly figure, establishing justice in his realm, which will be the whole world, creating a world where people are treated equitably, where preference is not given to anyone, where the poor and oppressed are cared for, where wickedness is punished. But he will not establish justice through worldly means, through power and domination and control. On the contrary, he will treat even the most wounded individual with gentleness and restorative love.

This is true greatness. Not just one who is the king and ruler over all, but one who stoops to love and care for every single human being, regardless of how wounded and broken they are. Is this not what our hearts long for? And yet Israel, God’s

servant, could not fulfill this calling, nor could any human king, prophet, religious leader, or individual. But the servant of the Lord would not be any ordinary human.

At Matthew 3:13-17, we see this fulfilled:

Matthew 3:13–17 - Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The servant is the Son of God, whom the Father loves, with whom He is well pleased. And God’s Spirit will rest on Him. And He will live a life that brings justice, but not through power and through being loud and self-advertising, but through love, grace, and humility. He will be gentle, but not weak.

Matthew 12:15–21 - Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. ¹⁶ He warned them not to tell others about him. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ “Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. ²⁰ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. ²¹ In his name the nations will put their hope.”

Jesus is the servant promised by Isaiah, who will bring the perfect blend of justice and compassion, truth and grace. **If your concern is for worldwide justice**, Jesus is the answer. **If your concern is for compassion for each and every individual**, Jesus is the answer. And those who claim to follow Him should strive to embody both.

Think of some of the major issues of our day. Immigration and ICE. Israel & Palestine. Trans issues. I’m not going to try to solve them, but I just want to point out how often the arguments over these issues center around trying to get the justice and compassion balance right. Maybe you believe that there should be an immigration policy and steps by which an individual legally emigrates into a country. And therefore you believe that those who are here illegally should be deported. But does that mean that any means necessary should be used, and that any display of power against such people is justified? Or is every human being in

our country someone who is made in the image of God and deserving of being treated with respect, with compassion, with due process?

Or maybe you are pro-Israel and want to defend them. But is there a way to uphold Israel's right to exist and defend itself in the Middle East while still wanting to see Palestinians treated with respect and compassion?

Or maybe you believe that there are two sexes, two genders, and that we should not change our understanding of that or teach something different to our children. But is there a way to uphold this truth while still demonstrating compassion to those who identify as trans, to treat them as individuals made in the image of God and worthy of being treated with respect? I was up in Middlebury, Vermont yesterday for a soccer game, and they had a moment of silence before the game for Lia Smith, an individual who was a biological male who identified as female and had been a member of the women's diving team before the NCAA rules changed. This individual took their own life last week. Is there a way to stand for what you believe is justice, that women's sports should be the domain of biological women, while also treating trans athletes not with ridicule but with compassion, recognizing that they often have a very fragile mental health?

Like I said, I'm not trying to solve every issue this morning. What I am trying to point out that our world is crying out for someone – a politician, a political party, a government, a leader – who can find that perfect balance between justice and compassion, truth and grace. There are some politicians and political parties, and some of you, who emphasize justice, fairness, upholding the law and punishing those who break it, but may be lacking in the compassion department. And there are other politicians, political parties, and some of you, who may strongly feel compassion towards those who are suffering, yet be lacking in the justice department.

But Jesus is the answer. Jesus is the Servant of God, whose mission is to establish justice, that people would be treated equitably, that the vulnerable and oppressed would be protected, and that sin would be punished, all while treating people with compassion. He knew just how to mix justice and compassion, grace and truth. Think of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery:

John 8:2–11 - At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. ³ The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group ⁴ and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of

adultery. ⁵ In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” ⁶ They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for **accusing him**. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. ⁷ When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” ⁸ Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. ⁹ At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman **still standing there**. ¹⁰ Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” ¹¹ “No one, sir,” she said. “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus declared. “Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Look at how the religious leaders try to trap Jesus in a binary where he would have to choose between justice – uphold the law and stone the woman – and compassion – set aside the law and let her go. But Jesus chooses neither approach. Instead, he shows the woman compassion – “neither do I condemn you” – while upholding the law – “Go now and leave your life of sin.” What would it look like for us to follow in His footsteps, showing compassion to all while also holding to the truth of God’s requirements?

Again, go back to Isaiah 42:

Isaiah 42:1–4 - “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; ⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

This is the greatness of our Lord. He is the high and lofty one who reigns over all and desires truth and justice and can do whatever He pleases. But His greatness is seen even more so in how he also stoops to love and minister to and comfort the broken.

Isaiah 57:15 - For this is what the high and exalted One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

Psalms 34:18 - The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Isaiah 66:2 - Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?" declares the Lord. "These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word."

That is the greatness of our God. He stoops to love us, to minister to us. Do not be afraid to be broken, to be needy, to be real before Him. Remember what Paul said about Jesus:

Philippians 2:3–11 - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, **being made in human likeness**. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If you are a bruised reed this morning, come to Him and receive His tender, gentle compassion and healing.

We have failed to strike the perfect balance of justice and compassion. We have set aside justice in the name of compassion, and we have set aside compassion in the name of justice. But at the cross, God's justice, His wrath, fell on Jesus as He died in our place, that we might be forgiven and receive God's perfect compassion and grace. And now, those of us who are followers of His are called to emulate Him by seeking justice and doing it with compassion, by holding to the truth of God but gracefully.

In Isaiah 42, the response to God's revelation of His servant is to worship this king.

Isaiah 42:8-13 - "I am the Lord; **that is my name**! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. ⁹ See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you." ¹⁰ Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth, you who go down to the sea, and all that is in it, you islands, and all who live in them. ¹¹ Let the wilderness

and its towns raise their voices; let the settlements where Kedar lives rejoice. Let the people of Sela sing for joy; let them shout **from the mountaintops**.¹² Let them give glory to the Lord and proclaim his praise in the islands.¹³ The Lord will march out like a champion, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will triumph over his enemies.

One day the Lord will return and establish justice on the earth. Sin and death will be no more, evil and wickedness will be destroyed, injustice and war and hatred will be cast into Hell. And the King will reign over a world of justice and love. Until that day, let us follow in His footsteps, that His Spirit might be in us as we work for a world of justice and compassion. Amen.