

**First Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish**  
**St. Francisville, LA**  
**1/12/2020**

**Matthew 3: 3-17**

I am often amazed by sommeliers. These are the people in fancy restaurants whose job it is to help you pair your meal with your wine. If you are ordering the duck confit they will recommend a Pino Gris or an aged Chardonnay. If you order a beef bourguignon they will recommend a Red Burgundy, and if you order a big burger and fries, they will refuse to talk to you but the bar tender will recommend a Budweiser.

In a way, this is what Lectionary writers do. They pair the scriptural readings of a day to make sure we get a unified theological theme that moves smoothly from the Old Testament to the Gospel. The first reading usually illustrates the theme in the Jewish Scriptures or Old testament, usually highlighting a conflict that must be resolved. The Epistle moves the theme or conflict into the New Testament and shows us how the First Century Church understood the theme or dealt with the conflict. Lastly, the Gospel shows us how Jesus of Nazareth fulfills, embodies, or resolves the theme or conflict during his life and ministry.

There are times when the pairings are a bit forced, or outright inappropriate, such as buying an expensive bottle of champagne to pair with your chicken wings. There are times when the pairings are absolutely correct. Today is one of those days when the Old Testament, Epistle, and Gospel combine to provide us a unified theme and conflict, which is fulfilled and resolved in Jesus of Nazareth.

We have no time in this brief sermon to do an extensive study of each reading, but let me summarize them for you. In Isaiah 42, our first reading, we see the introduction of the Suffering Servant character. This person will appear throughout chapters 42:1 to 53:12. In this section, the prophet introduces as to someone who will suffer greatly for his nation, taking the nations' faults and sin upon him, and ultimately choosing death to spare them from death.

The section begins, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights." Compare this to the words that are heard after Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son, the beloved, in you I am well pleased." These two statements are almost identical, which leads us to believe that perhaps Jesus of Nazareth is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. Listen to what this Suffering Servant says about himself in Chapter 50, "I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting." Then in chapters 52 and 53, we hear of the suffering of this servant. The narrator tells us, "He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of

suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.” But his suffering was necessary for the salvation of his people because by his wounds the whole nation is healed and restored. He takes away the guilt that covers his people like a veil or a mantle.

The Epistle in Acts 10 seems on the surface to be unrelated to the issue of suffering and the Song of the Suffering Servant. After all, this is a scene of baptism. Peter is called to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile, and he proceeds to preach the Gospel of Jesus to the entire household. At some point, the Holy Spirit descends on all gathered and they are filled with great joy. Peter then proceeds to baptize the entire group, bringing them into the Christian family. This appears to be a very happy scene, but there is a shadow of danger hanging in the background that those familiar with life in the First Century would have recognized. I will get back to this scene in a minute because I believe the Gospel of Matthew is a great bridge between Isaiah and the Acts of the Apostles.

Matthew today gives us the famous Baptism of Jesus story. Jesus comes to John, who refuses to baptize him (You should baptize me!) Jesus insists “To fulfill all righteousness.” John agrees to baptize Jesus, and a voice is heard from heaven, as he is coming out of the water, introducing God’s Son to the world, in the same way Isaiah introduces his Suffering Servant. Isaiah says, “Here is my servant.” Matthew says, “This is my my son.” In both cases, the identity of the person about which the author is speaking is revealed. He is a Servant. He is a son. It is as though both authors are saying the same thing: “Identity proceeds and determines vocation.” The Isaiah character will act as a servant, obeying the will of his master in love and surrender. Jesus will act as a dutiful and loving Son, doing the will of his Father to the end in complete devotion and love.

We know how both stories end. The Suffering Servant is crushed for our iniquities, enduring great humiliation for the sake of his people. The Son of God goes to the cross, enduring the same type of humiliations for the salvation of the whole world. In Matthew, Jesus’ baptism points to the ultimate fulfillment of the prophesy. Jesus will become the Suffering Servant of God, and his sacrifice will have redemptive value for people of all generations, cultures, and languages.

Now, we must talk about Cornelius and us. At their Baptism, this Gentile and his household are choosing a new identity as followers of Jesus of Nazareth. This identity will require a new ethic and a new way of being. This new identity will demand a new lifestyle. After all, “A Christian is as a Christian does,” as some people say. I believe the expression, “A Christian is as a Christian believes” is more accurate, but the message is clear enough. Following Jesus in hostile territory will be dangerous for Cornelius and his household. They will encounter rejection and ridicule. They may be brought before tribunals and city councils. They may lose their influence and status. They may even lose their lives.

This is the reality of Baptism in dangerous times. And this is the challenge for us today as we renew our own baptismal vows. Today we are accepting our identity as Christians once again and this identity will come with a new vocation. Above and beyond what we choose to do for a living, today we become messengers of the Gospel, ambassadors of Christ and powerful instruments in his redeeming love for humanity. Today we become his feet and hands to go where he leads and to do what he commands. Today, by nature of our baptism, we become suffering servants. Of course this is a bit of an exaggeration. Metaphorical language is usually expansive and exaggerate. No one is going to kill us for our faith. But, we nonetheless accept the challenge to become sufferings servants if necessary. We will be witnesses of Christ and this will make us very unpopular in some situations.

Being witnesses of Christ will demand that we do something to help those who are in need, lend an ear to those who are in pain, visit those who are isolated and alone, and speak on behalf of those who are oppressed. It means that we will be on the side of justice and compassion, that we will do what we can to become instruments of peace, that we will respect the dignity of all human beings. This is what is expected. We will by words and example preach and live the good news of God in Christ. This Good News is profoundly simple: All of us, regardless of age, gender, or race are children of God, beloved, and accepted.

Baptism is serious business. It may lead us to the cross. But he who calls us into his family, and welcomes us as his disciples, will lead us the rest of the way. He knows what it means to be obedient and he will show us the way. May he continue to bless you. Amen!