

Is 42:1-9  
9 January 2011  
Baptism of the Lord

### “Quiet Perseverance”

Last week, when my subject was flesh and blood—in particular, the flesh and blood of Jesus—I began by talking about vampire movies. Today, I want to mention a TV show from the 1970s that my mom and dad used to watch when I was a kid. It was set in the 1870s: *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine.

This was the premise of the show: we have someone with an American father and Chinese mother. He is orphaned in China and raised by Shaolin priests. After killing the Emperor’s nephew (who has just killed his teacher), he’s forced to flee the country. He goes to the American west, in search of his brother. In his journey, he deals with whatever injustice comes his way. I always liked the way he spoke. “I am Caine. I am called many names, but I have chosen ‘Caine.’”

I was reminded of Caine from *Kung Fu* because he has some qualities that are reflected in our scripture reading in Isaiah. (I’ll elaborate in a moment.) Caine’s life at the Shaolin temple has given him many skills. In fighting his opponents, he does so with almost effortless action. And yet, he is the very picture of a serene, almost pacifist, nature.

Isaiah 42 begins with the Lord proclaiming, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (v. 1). These are words very similar to those pronounced by the heavenly voice at the baptism of Jesus. That’s one big reason why it’s a scripture reading for today. There’s also the bit about the Spirit descending on him.

This is the first of the so-called “Servant Songs” in the book of Isaiah. We’ll look at the second one next week, in chapter 49. The third one is in chapter 50, and the last one, dealing with the “Suffering Servant,” starts at the end of chapter 52 and runs through 53.

The question is often asked, just who is this Servant? There are those who say that it’s the prophet himself. Others believe that a group, the people of Israel, is intended. And still others, showing Christian partiality, say that the Servant is none other than Jesus himself. And there are other theories. My own feeling is that Israel is intended, but only the Messiah can complete the Servant’s mission. Still, I’m willing to allow for multiple meanings.

Regardless of the Servant’s identity, there are, as I already suggested, some characteristics that this one possesses. When I was reflecting on this passage, I was especially drawn to verses 2, 3, and 4. The image I got was one of quiet perseverance. As I said, that was what reminded me of Caine’s demeanor in *Kung Fu*. But certainly, more than any fictional character, Jesus is the very definition of these qualities.

Verse 2 says of the Servant, “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street.” This one doesn’t appear to be terribly bombastic. Still, what purpose is served if we’re forced to say, “I can’t hear you”? How can you get your message across if you’re not out there promoting yourself? Doing book tours? Going on talk shows? Telling people to visit your blog?

In verse 3 we learn that “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.” I like the way that author (and AARP spelling bee finalist)<sup>1</sup> Dr. Bill Long puts it. Here are some of his comments on those images:

“How do reeds become crushed...? By the forces of nature and of people. Reeds become smashed because of storms and diseases, because of people stomping over them...We are reeds, subject to the forces of life that we cannot control and that sometimes descend on us with frightening speed and mercilessness. And so, we live our lives in a crushed condition.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the Servant in Isaiah will not break a bruised reed. He treads lightly on the earth. Again, I’m reminded of Caine in the show *Kung Fu*. When he was finally able to walk down a long length of rice paper without tearing any of it—leaving no trace behind—only **then** was he prepared to leave the Shaolin temple and go out into the world.

And about that “dimly burning wick,” Long says that “we are here compared to a wick which is...about ready to go out because the candle has melted. We may appear strong...but if we know ourselves well, we know that there are lots of forces at work...that make us terribly vulnerable to extinguishment...But the Servant won’t crush; the servant won’t extinguish.”<sup>3</sup>

Hearing this description of the Servant, like one who doesn’t elbow his or her way up to the front, we might be tempted to think that this gentleness is born out of weakness. “I know why the Servant doesn’t shout and shove and stomp! It’s because that clown is too feeble, too fragile!”

Verse 4 suggests otherwise. And it has, as our friend Dr. Long points out, a delightful turn of phrase. “The two [Hebrew] verbs used of the Servant in v. 4 have just been used by the writer in v. 3, but in inverted order.<sup>4</sup> In v. 3 we had the ‘crushed reed’ and the ‘smoldering [or “dimly burning”] wick;’ here we have the truth that the Servant will not ‘smolder out’ nor will he ‘be crushed.’”<sup>5</sup>

So the Servant won’t crush the reed or snuff out the wick that’s growing faint. At the same time, he won’t grow faint or be crushed.

And the Servant will keep at it. “He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.” The word for “coastlands” (the Good News Bible has “distant lands”) literally means “islands” (אִי, *iy*). It refers to the ends of the earth. That’s the kind of character we’re dealing with: not one who is feeble and fragile, but one who won’t get frustrated and quit!

I wonder, how do we compare? That can be hard to answer for ourselves. We can benefit from the insight of observers. From time to time, Banu has been willing to provide her observations to me. And I suppose, I’ve been willing to provide some to her!

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLVpayYqg8E>

<sup>2</sup> [www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42.html](http://www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42.html)

<sup>3</sup> [www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42II.html](http://www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42II.html)

<sup>4</sup> verse 3, רָצַץ (*ratsats*), “crush” & כָּהָה (*keheh*), “dim” or “faint”  
verse 4, כָּהָה (*kahah*), “grow faint” & רָצַץ (*ratsats*), “be crushed”

<sup>5</sup> [www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42II.html](http://www.drbilllong.com/LectinaryIV/Is42II.html)

The scripture readings about the Servant of the Lord, this week and next week, come along at a good time for our two churches. Hammondsport is ordaining and installing elders this week; Pulteney is doing it next week.

During that part of worship, we ask the questions for ordination and installation that appear in the Book of Order, but maybe we could add something else. Maybe something like: “Do you **refuse** to break a bruised reed or to quench a dimly burning wick? If so, please say, ‘I do.’” Maybe we could pose that to the congregation and add, “If so, please say, **We do.**”

If there’s any confusion, the Book of Order clears it up. “Those duties which all Christians are bound to perform by the law of love are especially incumbent upon elders because of their calling to office and are to be fulfilled by them as official responsibilities.” (G-6.0304a) How do you like that? The Presbyterian Church makes this official. If being a Christian isn’t **enough** for us to follow the law of love, being ordained as an elder makes it **our job!**

(I say “**our job**,” because according to the traditional language, Banu and I are **also** elders: teaching elders, as opposed to ruling elders.)

And ordination is permanent. Our *Companion to the Constitution* says, “Once a person has been ordained, the office of elder or deacon is a perpetual office. (G-14.0210) It is not dependent on current service on the session or board of deacons. It is not possible to lay aside the responsibilities or the privileges of the office at pleasure.”<sup>6</sup> (That’s good Presbyterian-speak!) So, would everyone who’s been ordained do me the “pleasure” of raising your hand?

Of course, it isn’t just a job; it’s an adventure. It’s a lifestyle. That’s true for **anyone** who would take the Servant of the Lord we see in Isaiah as a model, or a pattern, for themselves. It’s a lifestyle for anyone who senses the call, as verse 7 puts it, “to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Clearly, that has more meaning than just the literal one.

I want to close with some thoughts of the late George Knight, who was a missionary and teacher of the Old Testament. He speaks of the Servant as “meant to sit down alongside the brokenhearted just where they are to be found, [that is], in the mire of this human life of ours; and in this way, by his very presence with them, he will become the instrument by which a strength and hope that is not their own will be transferred to them.”<sup>7</sup>

I’m sure you know this at least as well, if not better, than I do. There is no substitute for that quiet, determined, stubborn perseverance that refuses to quit: to quit on those who have strayed...to quit, even when a dream, like a bruised reed, has been crushed...to quit, even when it seems like everything has been turned upside down.

Whether or not we’re holding an office in the church, all of us have been ordained to follow the law of love—to be servants of the Lord. And that ordination is a permanent one.

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<sup>6</sup> Frank A. Beattie, *Companion to the Constitution of the PCUSA* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999)

<sup>7</sup> George A. F. Knight, *Deutero-Isaiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), 73.