

“A Lot Unorthodox”

Isaiah 42:1-9

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.

He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.

He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

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:

I 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, to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

Matthew 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan,
to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying,

“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now;

for it is proper for us in this way

to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.

And 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.

And a voice from heaven said,

“This is my Son, the Beloved,

with whom I am well pleased.”

“A Lot Unorthodox”

Isaiah 42:1-7 and Matthew 3:13-17

January 11, 2026

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

Children’s Sermon - 6 pack of soda, drain one ahead of time from the bottom, distribute the remaining five but retain the drained can. Have them shake up cans as I shake mine. Talk about good stuff God has put inside of you just ready to come out. Open my can to fool them. Then, use sparkling juice, give them all some.

I.

This morning I would like to begin by bringing to your attention a fairly interesting, if not outright amazing, phenomenon thanks to lectionary. At this very moment, 10s of thousands of preachers just like me, are speaking to millions of people just like you about these very scripture readings having to do with the Baptism of Jesus. You would think, though, that with all these preachers working to understand these same passages we’d come up with a fairly definitive interpretation and simply distribute it via the mail or the internet, and stand up here and read it this morning and keep this fact a secret from you so you never realize all the while this same exact sermon is being preached this morning from every pulpit in every church in the country.

II.

Now believe me, if this were possible ministers would do it. Ministers, as a rule, are a terribly lazy bunch. We will take *any* shortcut that presents itself which allows us to make sense of the Biblical story. Because the faster we can make sense of it, the faster we can get the sermon written, and the faster we can get back to the golf course, or Presbytery committee work, or our doctoral studies, or our guitar playing. Realize, also, we are very clever about our laziness, we ministers are. We fool you folks into thinking that this is all part of the plan we call “orthodoxy”: *“The practice of conforming to traditional or established doctrine, belief and interpretation.”*

So, when it is time to write the Sunday sermon we simply look up the passage, go to the many biblical commentaries we have on the bookshelf in our studies, then we pass right by them and either go to the online sermon workshop service to which we subscribe or, better yet, type in “Orthodox sermon on Jesus’s Baptism into an AI engine ChatGPT or Perplexity and Wah-La, we’ve got ourselves a nice little sermon espousing all the orthodox views *we* should be espousing, and *you* should be hearing.

III.

Now, lest you think too poorly of us preachers, I should point out that this is nothing new. Thousands of years before the Messiah arrived on the scene everyone knew what he would look like. At least they *thought* they did. In our passage from Isaiah this morning, we hear the espousal of this orthodox view:

He is the chosen one, in whom God delights, He will not grow weary or be crushed. God's spirit will be upon him; he will bring justice, and will be a light unto the nations. He will open the eyes that are blind, and bring prisoners from dungeons of darkness.

IV.

Now, if you were one of those people who had been listening to that same sermon for a thousand years, imagine your surprise when a guy named Jesus shows up?!? He is chosen all right, chosen to join up with that *nut* John the Baptist out in the desert. And if God is delighting in him, its only because God has a powerful sense of humor. If God's spirit is upon him, he better get help to hold it up, because he doesn't look like he can even hold down a job let alone take *on* the job of bringing justice and light to those heathen nations. He would do much better just running on home to whatever backwater town he came from, what was it, Nazareth, and trying to get his own eyes opened so he can escape the darkness of his own obscurity. *Clearly*, Jesus was not the kind of person those folks, or their orthodoxy were expecting. Most probably Jesus was just a regular guy, a bit shabby and disheveled, going down with the rest of the lost souls to be baptized by John in the river Jordan.

V.

Now John, himself, had received the full dose of orthodoxy in his life-time as well. So do not think for a moment that John was not just as surprised to see that the one for whom he was preparing the way was no king, no military leader or politician, but some poor carpenter from Galilee. What John *could* see, however, apparently quite obviously, is that this Jesus was The One for whom they had all been waiting. "I need to be baptized by *you*," says John, "and yet, you come to *me*?" But Jesus answers, "Let it be so for now." So John consents to baptize Jesus, and as he pulls Jesus up from under the water, and the heavens open and the Spirit of God descended upon him, and a voice spoke fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, saying: "*This is my Child, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*" And the rest, as they say, is history.

VI.

Nonetheless, and as we know, that history was anything *but* orthodox, and it was more than a little unorthodox, it was *a lot* unorthodox. So every Sunday, preachers like me stand before congregations like you, and make a choice. I can be orthodox. I can tell you that the traditional view of these passages, is that they demonstrate how God was at work in the world, preparing the coming of Christ, and that God is still very much at work in our world continuing to bring justice through the work of the church, through those who have been baptized as he was.

Or, I can be just a *little* unorthodox. I can tell you that there is a such a thing *as* orthodoxy. This would tempt you to believe that you were being let in on a secret. Perhaps we would feel a little naughty about poking fun all *those* folks who stick to the orthodox view. This may even cause you to pay greater attention to the sermon, and maybe even think I'm clever in the little tricks I use to keep the sermon interesting. However, all this would be just to sneak in the orthodox view, by talking about it by not talking about it.

VII.

Or, I can be *a lot* unorthodox. I can point out to you the fairly controversial observation that Divine action in the world sometimes *requires* human initiative. I can challenge you to consider that God not only *uses* the work of people like John the Baptist but that, moreover, God *needs* human effort and initiative to be at work in the world.

I can reveal to you that I marvel at the personal epiphanies which happen now and again in the church. The personal awakenings people have to their own sacredness, not unlike Jesus at the River Jordan. When people realize that the spirit of God is upon *them* as well, and they join with Jesus in the work of bringing light to the nations, and freeing prisoners from the darkness. *And* I can risk unsettling you, by confessing that I believe the only way we find happiness in this life is to stop waiting for the God we expect, and start expecting the God who is much more than a *little* unorthodox.

VIII.

I began this sermon by bringing to your attention a fairly interesting, if not amazing phenomenon. At this very moment, 10s of thousands of preachers just like *me*, are speaking to millions of folks just like *you*, about these very scriptures readings having to do with the Baptism of Jesus. The reason we are all here doing this is not to bolster orthodoxy in the church, or to be clever in our interpretation of scripture. We are here to uncork the bottle, to try and find a way to release all that God given wonder that has been placed with in us. We are here to discover our *own* sacredness, to encourage one another in *their* sacredness, all the while enjoying this sacredness and having some fun with it.

Worship is about many things, but it is mostly about celebration. We are just beginning a new year, and if you have fallen off the path of your spiritual journey, this is a great time to get back on track. Today we remember the Baptism of Jesus, and we who have been baptized in his name celebrate the incredible belief, that we too, are beloved, in whom God is well pleased.

IX.

When I sat down to write today's sermon, this is where it ended. However, rather than say to you "Amen," I am going to do something really dumb. I am going to add addendum to the sermon. You see, after I completed the sermon I wondered what *would* an AI engine have to say about these passages? Now, please realize I know *nothing* about AI. I might have tried it once, but I have never actually *used* it for anything of meaning or substance. Ignoring the maxim, "Don't ask a question to which you don't want the answer," I went to an AI engine and typed in "Generate a sermon about the orthodox view of Jesus' baptism as found in Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17." I have included the three page answer at the end of the narrative sermon that was emailed out. I have to admit, it was a *shockingly* good response. So much so that I confess that I feel like a bit of an idiot for spending so many hours writing sermon all these years.

X.

However, while accurate in terms of the exegesis of the texts, the interpretation was a little bland and, really, not worth the journey to arrive there. In my opinion, at least. So, I asked the AI engine to generate a second sermon based on an *unorthodox* view of the these two passages. The response was even better, perhaps even approaching to great. Certainly every bit as good as I could have done in just a fraction of the time; mere seconds instead of hours. I have also include this two page sermon at the end of the narrative sermon with was emailed out this morning. They are there for you to look at, or not, as you wish. To the point, now, it was at that moment I had three profound realizations. With these I will end.

XI.

First, my job just got a heck of a lot easier. Second, that the answers at which we arrive, both in our lives and, especially, in our faith, are a *function* of the questions we ask and will only be as *good* as such questions. Not only do we need to ask the *right* questions, we must also ask the *hard* questions, and the *insightful* questions which few are willing or able to ask. Third, no matter how accurate or good a sermon the AI engine generated, it could not make the jump to the realization and affirmation of our own human sacredness. At the end of the day it is this, and this alone which will change the world and change how we understand ourselves and our place in that world. Amen.