

This Sunday's Readings – 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time – This Sunday's readings are really a continuation of last Sunday's readings (The Baptism of the Lord), which marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* comments on last Sunday's and this Sunday's first reading from Isaiah – “When we compare the second servant song with the first, which we read last week, we note two points of difference. First, the second song states that God formed his servant “from the womb.” This consciousness of predestination is characteristic of the Hebrew prophets (see [Jeremiah 1:5](#)) and recurs in Paul (see [Galatians 1:15](#)). Such an idea of predestination must not be allowed to harden into an abstract dogma but must be allowed to remain what it is in the Bible—a doxological expression of faith in a concrete situation. It is this fact that expresses itself in the annunciation and infancy narratives of the Gospels. The second point to notice is the enhanced emphasis on the universal scope of the servant's mission. The first song simply included the phrase “a light to the nations.” The second expands on this. “It is too light a thing” for the servant's mission to be confined to Israel: “I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.””

The first reading from Isaiah (2nd Isaiah written toward the end of the Babylonian Captivity) is from the second Suffering Servant section, which reemphasizes the fact that the “servant”, Jesus, is to be “a light to the nations”. The exiles have just returned from Babylon to a destroyed Jerusalem. It seems to them like an impossible task to rebuild the city to its former glory. They are downtrodden and in despair. This passage is one of encouragement and hope. God has a new role for Israel. It is no longer to be a kingdom unto itself, but it is to be much greater. It is to be a light to all the nations. This is fine but why is verse 4 omitted. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2008 syndicated column states – “No way can verse 4 be left out of today's Deutero-Isaiah reading. It's the reason the prophet composed this Second Song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. In the first three songs (42:1-4, 49:1-6, 40:4-9), Deutero-Isaiah reflects on experiencing Yahweh in his life and ministry. In the fourth and last song (52:13-53:12), the prophet's disciples reflect on their experience of him in their lives and ministry. This second song is triggered not by any physical pain or hurt, but by a suffering we all must endure: **failure**. Though Deutero-Isaiah never doubts his calling, he faces one gnawing problem. "I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength." He's simply not able to accomplish the task Yahweh gave him, to bring Jacob back to him and gather Israel to him”.

The Gospel reading, instead of being from Matthew, is from John. The reason for this is to continue reflecting on the Baptism of Jesus as the beginning of His public ministry. The Gospel of John was written sometime between 90 AD and 100 AD. This Gospel is very different from the other three Gospels in that it is not an historical account of Jesus' ministry but a theological treatise. Also, not much is known about the author, who was traditionally thought to be John, the son of Zebedee. Modern evidence does not support that theory. This particular event takes place the day after Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Jesus again comes to the river where John is baptizing. John immediately addresses Jesus as “the Lamb of God” and testifies to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, the promised one. Remember that John the Baptist was the last of the prophets with the task of preparing the way for the Lord. Only John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation,

also written by John, refers to Jesus as “the Lamb of God”. The lamb bears the sins of the people and is a direct reference back to Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant”. The servant is identified with the lamb that is led to the slaughter as a sin offering. Jesus will die to free us from sin and bring salvation to the world. Remembering today’s first reading, Fr. Roger Karban in his 2008 syndicated column adds – “Hearing John call Jesus the Lamb of God, Christians rarely think **failure**. We can’t separate this title from John’s next words. Jesus is the lamb “who takes away the sin of the world.” His dying and rising showed him to be our redeemer. Many of us regard parts of our own lives as complete washouts, periods in which we failed where we expected to succeed. Yet we might literally be too close to the action to make a valid judgment. One day we might be surprised - as many biblical folk were - to discover that our times of failure might have been our “finest hour””.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A* comments on today’s Gospel reading – “While the evangelist John has a deserved reputation as a theological and mystical author, he also presents some sobering glimpses into “real history.” In today’s reading, we learn that John the Baptizer was not very familiar with his kinsman, Jesus, and had difficulty recognizing him (w. 30, 33). In spite of this, the Baptizer proclaims himself a “witness” to Jesus. . . . Trials in ancient Israel were decided by the leading men of the city or synagogue who administered justice “in the gate” (see Amos 5:15; Deut 19:12). They did not investigate facts but rather made a decision on the admissibility and competence of witnesses who spoke either in defense of or against an accused person. The person who could muster the most impressive array of witnesses usually won. John’s Gospel in general has a strong forensic character. Chief among the impressive witnesses is John the Baptizer. Speaking to his opponents, Jesus says of John: “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light” (John 5:32-35). Other important witnesses in John’s Gospel are Jesus’ works, God, and Scripture. Jesus’ enemies in this Gospel frequently consulted John for his testimony. At the very beginning, the Judeans sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to learn John’s identity. And when he told them, they asked why he was baptizing since he did not have the proper credentials (1:19, 25). John was acknowledged as one who witnessed to the “truth,” something very unusual in the Mediterranean world (5:33). Culturally speaking, precious few people outside one’s close family have a right to the truth. In John’s Gospel, the Baptizer’s function is exclusively that of a forensic witness. He came to bear witness to the light (1:7-8). He testified about the “one coming after me” (1:15). He is a consistent witness to Jesus’ sinlessness. He points to Jesus as the stainless Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29, 36). He boldly affirms Jesus’ basic holiness when he says that he saw the Spirit of God on Jesus (1:32-33). According to this Gospel, Jesus was baptized so that he might be revealed to Israel (1:31). Here it is John the witness rather than a “voice from heaven” that boldly proclaims that Jesus is none other than “Son of God” (1:34). The Mediterranean notion of a “witness” like John baffles Americans who relish “eyewitness” testimony and factual veracity. Mediterraneans, in turn, consider our investigative behavior and “the public’s right to know” very rude and intrusive. At issue in both cultures is faith. What exactly does it mean?”

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