

## Restoration and Protection

### Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday After the Epiphany)

Isaiah 43:1-7

<sup>1</sup> But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup> Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

<sup>5</sup> Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

<sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, "Give them up." and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—

<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

A new student looks out on a sea of strange faces in the high school cafeteria, wondering where he should sit, which group he should join, how he will be received.

A woman walks down the hall in her empty house to look at her daughter's bedroom. The bedroom contains pictures and souvenirs of childhood and high school, left behind when this youngest daughter set off for her first year of college. Now the mother wonders what lies ahead—not just for her daughter but for herself, suddenly cut adrift.

An older man groans in his sick bed. Retirement from his successful law practice had not been that difficult. But now he has been felled by chronic illness that leaves him lethargic, with nothing to show for his days. He feels worthless.

A younger man drives toward his hometown. He has been away for two years in a minimum-security prison for misappropriating money at work. His time in prison has

ended, but he wonders if the true penalty he must bear for his wrongdoing is a lifetime sentence.

Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? These questions, which come to the forefront in adolescence and young adulthood, never really go away. Whether we ask them explicitly or only subconsciously, we often look for the answers in the wrong places: in our roles, our work, our peer groups, or our accomplishments and acquisitions. Ultimately, none of these can deliver what we need. What we need, according to the prophet, is to hear how God gives us identity and value, restoration and protection.

In Isaiah 43, the prophet speaks to a people bloodied, bruised, and beleaguered. As punishment for Israel's arrogance and disobedience, God had permitted Israel to be conquered by the Babylonians and thrown into exile. Before this passage, Isaiah had words of judgment; now he has words of comfort and hope. The tender words of Isaiah 43 reminded these exiles who they were and whose they were, despite their sins.

***Who They Were and Who We Are.*** The central verse of this passage is also the center of the prophet's message: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life" (v. 4). As Claus Westermann notes in his commentary on this passage, if the exiles were to take an honest look at themselves, they would see "a tiny, miserable, and insignificant band of uprooted men and women" standing on the margins of a hostile empire. But the prophet declares that this people have a new and different identity: they are a people valued and honored by God.

***Whose They Are and Whose We Are.*** "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (v. 1). What is Israel's comfort and hope? The One who made them has not turned away from them. Instead, God still claims Israel and holds

on to them. Israel belongs to God as sheep belong to a the property owner and are cared for by the shepherd. Therefore, Israel need not fear their plight or their foes, the chaos of the waters, or the dangers of the fire. In our baptism God gives us the same promise through our faith in Jesus Christ.

*Despite Their Sins and Despite Our Sins.* Isaiah 43 cannot be separated from the angry words of divine disappointment and judgment in Isaiah 42:18-25. Without Isaiah 43, Israel would not know that God's words of comfort and restoration are greater than Israel's sins and defeat. Despite Israel's sins, God will not let the rivers overwhelm Israel or "the flame... consume you" (v. 2). Without the reminder of Isaiah 42, Israel might be tempted to think that divine assurance is the same as divine license, that God's election of Israel is the occasion for self-indulgence. In the wrath of Isaiah 42 and the grace of Isaiah 43, "faith recognizes the presence of the God who wills only to love and be loved in return."

Who are we? Where do we belong? What makes us worthy? Isaiah 43 speaks not only to us as individuals but also to us as a community of faith. The prophet reminds us that our core identity lies not in our roles as individuals, or in our relative size and wealth as a congregation, but in God's identification of us as "precious in my sight, and honored" Our sense of belonging comes not from the acceptance of our peers or the status of our communities but from the One who claims us and will never let us go. What makes us worthy is not our individual achievements or the size of our congregational budgets but God's gracious love.

God called Israel precious in God's sight, despite Israel's sins. Therefore, when we fail and fall, as we inevitably will as both individuals and congregation, we can take comfort in the realization that our failures do not prompt God to quit loving us or laying claim to us. We can trust and hope in the God who is with us, who will restore us and will protect

us, even in the midst of the floods of chaos caused by our irresponsibility as both individuals and community of faith.

A new person comes to the church wondering where they should sit, are there groups in the church and which group he or she should join, how he will be received.

A woman walks down the hall in her empty house to look at bedroom she and her husband shared. The bedroom contains pictures and souvenirs of their life together. She wonders what lies ahead.

An older man groans in his sick bed. Retirement from his factory job had not been that difficult. But now he has been felled by chronic illness that leaves him lethargic, with nothing to show for his days. He feels worthless.

A younger man drives toward his hometown. He has been away for drug rehab for the second time. His time in rehab has ended, but he wonders if he can pick up where he left off with employment and family or will be have to start all over again.

Our scripture is paired with Luke's description of Jesus' baptism in the revised common lectionary. The pairing is an apt one, because in the waters of baptism, we understand that God marks us and claims us as God's children. In the waters of baptism, God seals God's love for us, no matter what we might have done and what might happen. In the waters of our baptism, God gives evidence of what God says to Jesus in Luke 3:22: "You are my [child], the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The comforting and hopeful words of Isaiah 43:1-7 are easier to read and write about than they are truly to hear and believe. **W. Carter Lester**

Hear God's words to you:

Thus says the LORD, he who created you, (put in your name), I formed you,  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are  
mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One, your Savior. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

Do not fear, for I am with you;

This is to everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

This is a passage we need to return to over and over, just as we need to be reminded of our baptisms. Words this good—love this uncommon—takes time to be believed and absorbed.

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.