

*Sermon Isaiah 43: 1-7 January 17, 2016*

But now, says the Lord - the One who created you, Jacob, the One who formed you, Israel: Don't 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; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched and flame won't burn you. I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I have given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place. Because you are precious in My eyes, you are honored, and I love you. I give people in your place, and nations in exchange for your life. Don't fear: I am with you. From the east I'll bring your children; from the west I'll gather you. I'll say to the north, "Give them back!" and to the south, "Don't detain them." Bring My sons from far away, and My daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by My name and whom I created for My glory, whom I have formed and made.

Sometimes scripture is so beautiful, and feels so personal, and so restorative, that I kiss the page or lay my cheek on it, to take it in, to hold it as close as I can, to absorb it. This morning's scripture from the prophet Isaiah is such a scripture. The imagery and promise of God's presence and love are wonderful enough for a tattoo: "Don't 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." The problem with a tattoo however is that coloring flesh with ink is similar to words on the page: it's one-dimensional, and the word of God is (as the apostle Paul wrote to the early church) "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword."

The Word of God can't be merely taken at face value because that trivializes it and makes it less powerful. The lazy part of me does want to take scripture at face value because then I don't have to wrestle with it, or answer to it, or be changed by it. I'd like to merely believe that because God's Word says that rivers and fires life throws at me won't overwhelm me that it's so. Actually I'm a big fan of tattoos. One of my favorite authors is Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, whose arms are covered with tattoos of images from the bible. I recently read her new book, *Accidental Saints*, and in it she explains the difference between being religious and spiritual. Pastor Nadia says that being spiritual is a personal experience, and being religious is largely a communal experience. I love that definition. We are Christian and we are a communal people (we are the Body of Christ.) Our scriptures include the Hebrew Scriptures which were written for a communal people (God's chosen people.) So we hear the Word of God in community and take it in and try to understand it and experience it as the people of God. This isn't to say that we don't read scripture on our own, but that it's vital to our understanding of who we are and what our mission is, to hear and absorb and wrestle with God's Word together. Today's scripture lesson is so important to us about our relationship with God that I encourage you to take the bulletin home with you and read Isaiah 43:1-7 every day.

Isaiah's words of comfort and reassurance were delivered to Israel, who had been conquered by the Babylonians and thrown into exile. Earlier in Isaiah's prophecy it's clear that this was seen as punishment from God for Israel's faithlessness

and disobedience. In exile Israel was scattered and fractured, and once again enslaved. But God is a God of relationship, and mercy and redemption are God's middle names. To redeem something is to buy it back. God redeemed Israel through God's actions of love and mercy. God called God's people back to freedom and relationship using Isaiah's words to proclaim the truth (which is what a prophet does) of God's love and forgiveness.

God seems unable to hold back love... God just loves. It's who God is. This makes God sound something like a grandpa or a teddy bear but God has expectations of us who claim the name given to us in the waters of baptism: "You are Mine." God's expectations are that because we are restored to relationship with God, we will give back God's love, to God, to others, and to ourselves, and that we will extend that love out into the world... way out, even past our comfort zones.

How do we make Isaiah's beautiful words of relationship and redemption alive and active and 3-dimensional? How are they more for us than an ancient promise to the Israelites? Here are 3 ways to help breathe life into these words... transforming them from words on a page of scripture into soul-food. I hope you'll find someplace on your bulletin to write these down, because the hand "writing" helps the heart absorb and the head retain information (which is why journaling is a spiritual practice.)

1. The first word is "Remember." Life is very hard. Torrential waters and raging fires are metaphors for life. And being a Christian or a person of faith doesn't protect us from pain and heartache and loss. It doesn't keep us from wrong choices and stupid mistakes and hard consequences. What faith does do is help us remember God's goodness, God's blessings, God's love. Faith gives us a place to stand; it tells us who we are; it reminds us that in the waters of baptism, God named us: "You are Mine." So when hard times come we remember who we are; we remember our history as God's people that stretches farther back in time than we can count. Isaiah's prophetic words given to Israel are meant for us living today. We remember that like the Israelites, when we walk away, worship golden calves, and forget God's goodness to us, God is still faithful. God calls us back into relationship; God redeems us from captivity to sin-sickness.

One of the reasons I sometimes hold scripture to my lips or to my cheek is because I can forget who I am. I can get lost in worrying about how other people see me; I can get stuck in my sins and mistakes. I forget that God has named me and claimed me. God has given me my identity: "You are Mine." Scripture, worship, singing, walking, silence, solitude, prayer... all of these can bring me back to my true self and help me remember that what defines me is my relationship with Jesus Christ, how He sees me, how He knows me, and how He loves me.

Israel had a communal memory of God's faithfulness stretching back to their delivery from slavery in Egypt. Their story of remembering and forgetting, of falling and rising, and of God's love and God's plan for them... is also our story. Together we remember that throughout our history God has loved us, God has been faithful to us, God has been present with us. Because we are a community of faith, we remember for each other when sin and trouble make us forget... that God has promised us: "I call you by name... you are Mine."

2. The second word is "Presence." In Isaiah's prophecy he doesn't mention Jesus but we hear His name when God says, "I will be with you." Jesus was called

Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. This is God's amazing gift to the world that we celebrate at Christmastime: God came to be with us. God was born as vulnerable human baby to live our life and die our death and redeem our glorious, fragile humanity. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection we see God's unstoppable love and God's unquenchable longing for relationship with us. Out of love for us, God broke into our world and became one of us. Out of love for us, God has promised to be with us.

Many years ago I had a CT scan of my head. I lay down and a cage was fastened around my head, and I was slid into a tube of darkness. Did I mention that I'm claustrophobic? I'd been offered a tranquilizer but I don't think I took it. I wanted to be in control... but as soon as I went into that dark tube I lost control. I pushed the "stop" button they'd put in my hand and spoke into that dark tube. "I can't do this. Get me out of here." Ralph was with me, and he said over the microphone, "I'm here." He probably said some other words of husbandly support but what I heard was "I'm here." He kept his hand on my foot throughout the scan, and because he was with me I was able to get through it.

At the beginning of our story as God's people God revealed God's self to Moses in a burning bush. Moses, remember, was the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, but because he'd killed an Egyptian who was beating a fellow Israelite, Moses took on a new identity, living in the desert and tending his father-in-law's sheep. God told Moses that Moses was going to Pharaoh and speak to him, on God's behalf, and demand that Pharaoh let the Israelites go. Moses was afraid... afraid to return to Egypt, afraid to speak in public, afraid to confront Pharaoh. He argued with God until God promised Moses, "I will be with you."

I think the most godly thing I do, when I sit with people who are afraid, is to hold their hand, and pray with them, and to say with all the confidence that Isaiah had when he spoke for God: God is with you. I'm here to remind you that God is with you.

Because God is present with us... nothing else in all creation has the power to ultimately overwhelm us or undo us. Nothing in all creation... again I'm quoting the apostle Paul... nothing can separate us from the love of God we experience in Christ Jesus.

3. The third word is "Restore." God restored the relationship God had with Israel, and in the merciful love of Jesus Christ God has restored us to relationship with God. To restore is to bring something back into existence. It is to mend, to build, to repair, to create. God is the great restorer and Creator. In the waters of baptism we symbolically die to sin and are raised to new life in Christ. We are recreated in the likeness of Jesus Christ, whose mission and purpose was to en flesh the love of God.

The old doors from our original sanctuary have been found, restored, and hung on the Fellowship Hall side of the sanctuary, thanks to Ray Peters, Wendell Pleiss, and Linda Berti. There was a lot of muscle put into the work of restoring those doors. Thanks to you all! Next week I'd like for us to consecrate the doors.

Jesus has done the work for us of restoring our relationship with God, through His sacrificial love for us. And there's an expectation of us, there's a price to pay for being restored to freedom from sin-sickness to relationship with God. It's that we also do the work of restoring broken relationships. Some of the relationships we need to restore are within our own families, and some are with strangers, groups of people we've mistreated or cast aside, and even with creation itself. Restoration includes

asking for and offering forgiveness. It includes loving even when love isn't returned, and even when love isn't deserved. It includes setting prayerful boundaries to protect yourself, and it includes, when it's possible, creating something new, a relationship free from the past.

This morning the De Torres twins have been baptized and we have (symbolically) waded with them into that glorious and unpredictable river that is the baptized life. In the waters of baptism we are named; of course the names our parents have chosen for us, but we are also named "God's own." We are no longer just our own; God has restored that relationship and now we belong to God. We'll have careers and hobbies and skills and interests throughout our lives, but in the waters of baptism we have been named and given a purpose. Our purpose is, like Jesus, to en flesh the love of God. To wear it, to show it, to tell the world of the Creating, Redeeming, and Sustaining love of our God.

Isaiah has prophesied to us that we are God's people, known and beloved and restored to relationship with God. In response, let us remember and be thankful for this amazing gift; be present to God and others; and participate with God in restoring the brokenness of the world. Amen.