

January 12, 2025 10:00 a.m.

Sermon Texts: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-2

Isaiah 43: 1-7

1 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.

2 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.

SERMON “Who Do You Belong To?”

Water. Fire. Two images that can seem opposite to each other. It's hard to have fire in the midst of water – unless there is oil or other flammable chemicals floating on the top of the water's surface. It's hard to keep most campfires going when it's doused by an unexpected rainstorm. Water. Fire. Two opposing elements in this world. The second half of 2024 brought us misery through water in the back-to-back hurricanes

that hit Florida and the Appalachians. Now we begin 2025 with the destruction of fire – wildfires burning in a major metropolitan city, Los Angeles and its surrounding communities, with video of red flames and black smoke creating surreal, hellish images that stop us in our tracks, create fear when we see communities we NEVER would have imagined in this situation, getting hit by disasters like this. It's made me have a couple moments of pause, to question what I can do to be safer, to be protected from the destructive fire and water that falls upon us with more frequency.

The prophet Isaiah brings up the imagery of both in the 43rd chapter we read. After giving the people of Israel a harsh tongue lashing in previous chapters, now we get to hear words of comfort. Isaiah starts out with language that would remind them of the nature of their God: “he who created you,” “he who formed you,” and then Isaiah pivots immediately into words of redemption.

When we think of the persons of God as creator, savior and comforter – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we can often

associate God the Creator with power, sovereignty, providence; we associate God the Redeemer/Savior with love, forgiveness and grace. But in Isaiah, we hear the creative acts of God and the saving acts of God not as separate aspects of God's nature, but linked together. Creation, rather than simply being an act of power on the Maker's part – "Let there be light!" – now this power manifests itself as an act of love. And the same with salvation as an incomprehensible act of love is also an act of power, re-creating through Jesus' death and resurrection a world that is restored to harmony to overcome the sin that estranges us from God.

Creation, salvation. They also mirror the divine nature and human nature that coexist in God in the person of Jesus Christ. They're not in tension; they're in balance. And so, Isaiah uses images of both water and fire: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,... and the flame shall not consume you." The waters that evoke God's creation, the fire that represents the trials of this human life. Isaiah shares these words God placed on his heart: "Do not fear, for I am with you."

God is assuring the people of Israel that what seems to be a consuming, destructive moment in their history will cleanse and refine them. God IS with them; God is still present, by their side.

There are very human questions that we ask throughout our lifetime. The first day in a school, new classrooms and classmates, the young person wondering – who might be a friend, what group will I fit into? The first day after a young adult leaves home for college or military duty, with the parent asking – what lies ahead, what will their relationship be going forward, and who am I now that my task as a parent is no longer the primary focus of my daily life? The person who retires after a long career in an organization, a career that gave them a title, a job description, a purpose every day, asking the question – what will I have to show for my days from this point on, how do I have worth?

Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes ME worthy? These questions arise for us every stage and season of our human life. So Isaiah also gives us another message in this

comforting passage: one of inclusion. As I said earlier, Isaiah was speaking to people who were beaten down, bruised in spirit by the proverbial fires and floods of their exiled life. It left them wondering “Who is our God that would let this happen to us? Where do we go now that our land and temple and way of worship has been taken away? What makes me worthy without the Temple worship, sacrificial rituals, national identity I’ve lived under for so long?” And so in tender words, Isaiah reminds these people who they are and whose they are, despite their past sins and current sinful inclinations.

First, they are reminded WHO they are. The central verse of this passage, v. 4, is the center of the prophetic message here: “Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...” These people aren’t the conquerors, the powerful that moved into the Promised Land centuries before. They have a new identity: they are people valued and honored, and beloved in God’s sight, just for the fact that God made and formed them. Nothing else matters.

Second, they are reminded WHOSE they are. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.” Possessiveness. Again, God still was claiming Israel, was holding on to them and holding them up. They belonged to God, like a sheep to a shepherd. As much chaos as Israel felt they were living in, the chaos of the waters, the dangers of the fire, these words were given to them: Do. Not. Fear.

Who are we? Where do we belong? What makes us worthy? These words in Isaiah don't just speak to us as individuals – author Carter Lester points out they also speak as much to us as a community of faith as it does to us as individuals. God in Isaiah's time was speaking to a community. Isaiah reminds us today that our essential character, our core identity as a people of God, the Church, doesn't lie in the title and status of the individuals within the community, doesn't get measured by our relative size or wealth, but lies in God's identification of us as “precious in my sight.” Our sense of belonging doesn't come from voting with a winning political group, doesn't come from any national identification. Our

worthiness is not the individual achievements of individual members and friends in the church we attend, it's not the size of our congregational budget. We are worthy because God created us in God's gracious love. Our worthiness comes only from God's gracious love.

The ordination and installation of new ruling elders and deacons will be done today. They'll be joining other ruling elders continuing on our leadership team, our Session, and also joining those continuing their terms on our Board of Deacon. Together, they govern this Church, and serve in pastoral care to members and in mission to the community we live in. Part of this installation usually includes a remembrance of baptism. In this remembrance of baptism, they'll renew their baptismal vows to a new life in Christ, to serve Christ as leaders in his Church.

But this Sunday in the church year is also a remembrance of the baptism of Jesus Christ as he began his ministry. And so we think about the implications of this sacrament we celebrate together as a family of God. The Lukan story of Jesus' baptism

leans into Jesus' humanity. We hear, "When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too." Jesus wasn't baptized because he was sinful and needed to repent of his sins. He was baptized acknowledging he is one with us. As humans, in the sacrament of baptism we submit to God leading our life, joining ourselves with other believers into the body of Christ, the church. Jesus was baptized to show his submission to God, his Father; and, to show his identification with humanity. This is a message Luke continually reminds us of in his gospel of Jesus. We have a God who has suffered. We have a God who has cried. We have a God who chose to live this experience out of God's unquenchable love for us. And love burns away all unworthiness; it washes away all shame. We aren't loved because we've been baptized. We aren't loved because we are worthy of it. God's love from the day we were created is what makes us worthy, mistakes and flaws and doubts. God's love is the source of our worthiness.

Isaiah was speaking to people who longer felt like they belonged anywhere, who no longer felt they were beloved.

They had lost everything – their country was a pile of burning rubble, torched fields; their mementos of life in the Promised Land limited to what they could carry with them. They don't know if it's worth rebuilding a life while in exile. They feel unworthy. And just when we think we can't relate to what that might feel like, can't imagine a feeling of total loss that happened centuries ago – well, we see with our own eyes contemporary moments of total loss: Belongings hanging from trees and matchsticks of former homes pressed up on shores from raging waters of hurricanes. The disappearance of an entire lifetime, turned to cinder and ash in the raging fires that engulf everything in their path. Isaiah CAN speak to us today, with the winds and waters of this past fall, and with the raging fires this week:

“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.”

The God we believe in is love in power. We are God's creation, and in that assurance we are told to let go of fear in the face of the storms of life. / Not very easy to do in the lowest points of our frail human lives. / But belonging to God, knowing we are God's creation and that Jesus shared in our humanity, we are assured we have God's presence alongside us in times of joy and in times of devastation. And so we listen again to the words of God through the ancient prophet:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name; you are mine.”

In that assurance, we all listen for God's call through the challenges of life; we all listen for God to call our name to serve his kingdom here on earth. Amen.

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