

Baptism of Our Lord
Isaiah 43.1-7
January 7, 2007
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

This is a *Celebrate* insert to be taken home, cut up, and cherished. The passage from Isaiah is one that speaks to my heart, and I hope to yours. These messages from God to us are “keepers”:

Do not fear.... (Isa. 43.1)

I have called you by name.... (Isa. 43.1)

...[Y]ou are mine. (Isa. 43.1)

You are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you. (Isa. 43.4)

and again,

Do not fear, for I am with you. (Isa. 43.5)

We are nothing if not a **community**, the people of God, as were the people of Israel, for whom the author of Second Isaiah served as a prophetic voice. (If you’re wondering what or who “Second Isaiah” is, be sure to join Pastor Leitzke on Wednesday for the beginning of the new Weekday Spirituality series which is a bible study on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah!) The Word of God spoken to the **community** in the 6th century B.C. **and** in the 21st century A.D. is certainly spoken to **individuals** as well.

Which portion of this love letter from God printed on the first page of *Celebrate* do you need to take to heart, and even learn **by** heart?? Decide and then cut out that snippet of the reading and put it where you’ll be most apt to bump into it when you need comfort or courage or confidence the most. Maybe that’ll be on the bathroom mirror so you start your day with God smiling back at you... or on the dashboard of your car so the verse can seep into your soul as you

commute to work... or as a bookmark in the textbook of the class that worries you most... or in your eyeglass case so you're reminded to see yourself and the world through God's eyes...

The prophet who spoke and wrote these welcoming, heartwarming, remember-for-a-lifetime words from God **needed** comfort and courage and confidence at least as much as we do. He lived in exile, forced to live in a foreign land, following the fall of Jerusalem and the deportation of the upper class to Babylonia. He has an exquisite word of hope, redemption, joy to speak to the other people exiled with him. He didn't have that word on his lips because he was the most chipper one in the group. He was just as down in the mouth as everybody else about being far from home and living in the time after their country was overrun, their temple destroyed, their government erased, and God's long-predicted and just wrath for their sins having struck like a hammerblow through the empire-building of Nebuchadnezzar.

To give you some idea of the prophet's frame of mind, in his only reference to himself he writes that when God told him to cry out the good news of the redemption at hand, he answered,

“‘What shall I cry?’ All people are grass....” (Isa. 40.6)

In other words, our existence is fleeting and almost as soon as we appear we disappear again.... So what's the point of assigning meaning to any of it?? But God prevailed and the prophet who had sat in gloom saw some light dawn and through the Holy Spirit was able to speak an extraordinary word of hope to a beleaguered people with whom he identified totally....

Through him God reminded those folks in exile that He had punished them for their sins precisely **because** they were His chosen people who had been unfaithful to Him. The destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon constituted a **chapter** in the story about God and the people God had elected. Those sad events were somewhere in the middle, and not the **end** of the story, of salvation history.

Through this prophet God reminded the people of the exodus from Egypt and the divinely guided journey to a Promised Land. This time God promised a homecoming from exile. The

Word is that God has redeemed His people, literally meaning He has paid the price to set them free from their captivity. God says He has given whole nations to redeem His chosen people. Now that their captivity is over, God will watch over them as a prized possession on the way home, protecting them from flood waters, lightning, any natural obstacle which could slow or stop their progress. “I have called you by name, you are mine,” means “I own you.” The people are not like so much chattel (slaves, livestock or household goods) hauled home from war, though, for their LORD says:

... you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you.

We had a funeral here on Friday for Marina Angstadt. Afterward a man came up to tell me he had found the service immensely comforting, which of course was encouraging. The man went on to tell me he is Jewish. I was grateful and fascinated that he found a service centered on the hope we find in the resurrection of Jesus Christ to be comforting. In this passage from Isaiah we are reminded that the God revealed in Hebrew Scripture is referred to as Redeemer long before Jesus Christ was born. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the source of hope for **all** people who worship the one true God, Christians, Jews and Muslims alike.

The added extra for us Christians, of course, is that God sent the Son to redeem us not from Egyptian slavery or Babylonian captivity, but from “sin, death and the devil,” as Luther would say. It’s the captivity to our sins from which Jesus releases us. It’s our destiny with death from which Jesus liberates us.

Second Isaiah spoke God’s word of redemption and comfort to a people still in exile. We, too, still are bound by the fetters of earthly temptations and limitations to something less than the full freedom of the children of God. So we, like the people of Israel, remember God’s total faithfulness in the past to help us trust in God’s total faithfulness in the future.

It is because of your baptism that God calls you by His Son's name, "Christian." Put the reminder where you please, on the fridge, computer screen, or bedroom mirror, but remember well His words to you:

Do not fear.... (Isa. 43.1)

I have called you by name.... (Isa. 43.1)

...[Y]ou are mine. (Isa. 43.1)

You are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you. (Isa. 43.4)

St. Paul would add, "And remember, you are not your own. You have been bought with a price."

Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham