

Isaiah 43:1-7

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. ²When 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. ³For 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. ⁴Because 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. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I 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— ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

What do you expect in the coming year? What do you hope for? What do you predict will happen?

This is the season of predictions, isn't it? Who will win the super bowl? Will the economy recover?

What are your expectations for the coming year? It's very important that we think about what we expect because our expectations often influence our perceptions of reality. And unrealistic expectations can even be dangerous.

The Bible tells us that when John the Baptist preached it was a time of great expectation. The people were expecting a Messiah, and they hoped that John might be their man. They hoped that

he might lead a great military crusade and deliver them from Roman control. They hoped that he might end the exploitation of a corrupt and immoral King Herod.

John's expectations of the Messiah were in line with the expectations of the people. He said that the Messiah would bring a baptism of fire. He would bring God's judgment on a corrupt system. The Messiah would divide the wheat from the chaff. And the chaff he would burn with unquenchable fire.

An oppressed people saw this as good news. God was coming to save his people. God was coming to establish a kingdom of justice and righteousness that would replace the despots who ruled their world at that time.

But, in one area their expectations would not come true. John was not the Messiah. His baptism of repentance only prepared the way for the Messiah. In fact the Messiah that John envisioned was so much greater than him that he was not even worthy to untie his sandals, a task usually reserved for the lowest in a staff of household servants.

If any held out hope that they could draft John for the job, those hopes were dashed. John was arrested and put in prison because John dared to point out publicly what everyone else was saying private. Herod was an immoral, illegitimate ruler. The powers that be to not respond well to being called immoral and illegitimate. Everyone knew that John would soon lose his head over this statement.

I'm sure that the people were sorely disappointed. Maybe they wondered if their expectations about a Messiah were nothing more than a pipe dream. Maybe the only real golden rule was that "he who had the gold makes the rules." Maybe the best they could do was learn to live with Herod and Caesar, to make peace with a world that was far from perfect.

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

And yet, the Bible tells us that in that very imperfect world God was already at work. In Luke's gospel it seems to go unnoticed. Among all the people that were baptized there was also a man named Jesus who was baptized.

And as this man named Jesus prayed the heavens opened up, the Holy Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The early church had trouble with this idea that Jesus was baptized. Many have speculated about why Jesus, if he were sinless needed to be baptized. After all baptism was a sign of repentance.

There have been a number of suggestions as to what the baptism of Jesus meant, but the most helpful I think is the idea that through his baptism Jesus identified with sinful humanity. The

perfect became a part of the imperfect. The eternal became a part of the temporal. As Paul put it in his second letter to the Corinthians, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

In other words in the baptism of Jesus the divine meets the human. The heavens open up, the Holy Spirit takes on bodily form and a blessing is pronounced upon Jesus.

Why is this so important? What does the baptism of Jesus mean to us?

When God in Christ lowered himself to our level, we were lifted up. In a world where every hint of hope seems to be snuffed out at the earliest opportunity, God is quietly going about the task of changing things. In this tired old world God is making all things new. In this world where guilt and shame reign supreme God is bringing a word of redemption and hope.

Since he who knew no sin took on our sin, since in Jesus Christ we are forgiven, the words from heaven are not for Jesus alone. Those words are for us as well. When we are baptized in Jesus it is a sign that we have been adopted into the family. God says to us, “You are my daughter. You are my son. I love you. I am pleased to have you as my child.”

THE POWER OF BAPTISM

This is a very powerful statement. If more people could hear this voice, the world would be a different place. If we could hear this voice, we would be different people.

The great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther was plagued at times by a sense of unworthiness and despair. To drive back those demons, he kept an inscription over his desk that read, "Remember, you have been baptized."

Often, he would touch his forehead and remind himself, "Martin, you have been baptized."

We say that baptism is a “visible sign of an invisible grace.” Baptism is our way of reminding ourselves that we are children of grace. We’re certainly not perfect, but we are forgiven. The word of God to a people whose expectations have not been met and who are discouraged about the future is this:

God still loves you. God forgives you. God is willing to take you home.

In his book *Craddock Stories*, celebrated preacher Fred Craddock tells of an evening when he and his wife were eating dinner in a little restaurant in the Smokey Mountains. A strange and elderly man came over to their table and introduced himself. "I am from around these parts," he said. "My mother was not married, and the shame the community directed toward her was also directed toward me.

Whenever I went to town with my mother, I could see people staring at us, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school, I ate lunch alone.

In my early teens, I began attending a little church but always left before church was over, because I was afraid somebody would ask me what a boy like me was doing in church. One day, before I could escape, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

It was the minister. He looked closely at my face. I knew that he too was trying to guess who my father was. 'Well, boy, you are a child of. . .' and then he paused. When he spoke again he said,

'Boy, you are a child of God. I see a striking resemblance.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go on and claim your inheritance.'

I left church that day a different person," the now elderly man said. "In fact, that was the beginning of my life."

"What's your name?" Dr. Craddock asked. He answered, "Ben Hooper. My name is Ben Hooper."

Dr. Craddock said he vaguely recalled from when he was a kid, his father talking about how the people of Tennessee had twice elected a fellow who had been born out of wedlock as the governor of their state. His name was Ben Hooper.

Just as it happened to Ben Hooper, the voice from heaven says to us,

"You are my Child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

You may think that you're illegitimate. But, I know your name. You're mine.

A PROMISE FOR PEOPLE IN EXILE

These words may come from heaven but they do not come out of the blue: they echo God's words from Isaiah long before: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:1b, 4a).

That's our Old Testament lesson for today. This message from heaven also takes place in a time when the expectations of God's people were not being met.

In fact nothing was going right. The children of God had sinned and as a result of their sin they were being judged. They were in captivity in Babylon. A captive people soon lose all hope, and this was certainly true of the Jews in exile. By the waters of Babylon they laid down their harps and refused to sing any more.

But, just when they thought things couldn't get any worse; they did. A new power, Persia had arisen in the east, and it was threatening to attack Babylon.

Now after almost fifty years in captivity it looked like God's people would once again be pawns in a game they could not control. Babylon was sure to be destroyed. Wartime fear swept through the frightened little colony of Jews.

And yet it was at this moment when the expectations of the past were dead and the future looked uncertain that God said to this frightened little band of captives, "I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are precious in my sight. I love you."

During this time the prophet also proclaimed the message of God with these words, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem ... do not be afraid, I will be with you."

Christians now quote those words every year at Christmas. You could argue that the good news is summarized in four little words. "Do not be afraid."

It was the message that the angels brought to the shepherds when Jesus was born. It was the message that angel spoke on Easter morning. It was the message that Jesus left with his disciples before he ascended into heaven. "Do not be afraid. I am with you always."

God's promises are not dependent upon circumstances. Indeed, the message of the Bible seems to be that when things look their worst our redemption draws nigh.

God is not some distant deity who pulls the strings of history. God is like a mother who listens in the night for the cries of her children. The Lord says, "Do not be afraid. I have created you. I love you. I am coming to save you."

The Bible tells us that this one true God knows the number of hairs on your head. This God knows our name. This God has come to earth in his Son, Jesus. This God is with us.

INFANT BAPTISM

Now does this mean that things will always go our way? Of course not.

This past week our Bible study had a discussion about infant baptism. In just a few short weeks we will be celebrating a few more of those baptisms in our church.

The folks at the Bible study wanted to know what infant baptism meant. Surely it couldn't mean that the child was accepting the faith. The child only knows that it's hungry or that it need a diaper change.

And of course that's true. The child is baptized as a sign of God's promise to care for His children and as a sign of our promise to bring that child up in the faith. We promise to care for that child's faith needs just as we care for their physical needs. And we believe that when they reach an age of accountability that faith will be confirmed in their lives.

But, of course someone always asks, "How do we know that will happen? How do we know that the child will accept the faith? How do we know that the parents will bring the child up in the faith? Isn't baptism at this point a bit premature?"

I think that argument can legitimately be made. We don't know what the future holds. We don't know that human beings will be faithful to their promises. We don't know that faith will be confirmed.

But, I still think that infant baptism is a good idea because it is a demonstration not of our faith but of God's promises and God's grace.

Yes, we may fail in our promises, but God never fails.

When we baptize a child we pray for the best. We pray that they will have health and joy and peace. But, we also know that nothing is guaranteed.

That little boy or that little girl will face the harsh realities of life. They will, like all human beings pass through the waters of life's hardships. Despite our best efforts we cannot keep them from experiencing the pain of life.

But, we can entrust these little ones, just as we entrust ourselves to the care of an almighty and all loving God.

That God knows their name.

That God created them. That God will never forget them.

That God will come to them and be with them at every turn.

DON'T BE AFRAID

It's like the promise that we read from the prophet Isaiah this morning. It's a promise for our children and it's a promise for us as well,

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

When you walk through the fire, the flame shall not consume you.

I have called you by name, and you are mine."

In 1976, American's bicentennial year, a writer came up with an intriguing idea. He thought, "Our nation is 200 years old. I'll bet I can find someone who is alive today who is old enough that when a child, they remembered meeting someone old enough to have been alive at the founding of our country. This would be a living link to the past."

It turns out that he found such a person. A Kentucky farmer named Burnham Ledford who was over 100 years old in 1976 remembered when he was a little boy being taken by wagon to his great-great grandmother's house. At that time she was over a hundred years old and was a little girl when George Washington was inaugurated as the first American president.

When the writer asked Burnham what he remembered, he said he remembered being taken into his great-great grandmother's house. She was feeble. She was blind and sitting in the corner of a dark bedroom.

His father said, "We brought Burnham to see you." The old woman turned toward the sound and reached out her bony fingers and said in an ancient, cracking voice, "Bring him here."

Burnham remembered that they had to push him toward her. He was afraid of her. But, when he got close she reached out her hands and began to stroke his face. She felt his eyes and his nose and his chin. And all at once she seemed satisfied and pulled him close and held him tight.

She said,
"This boy's a Ledford. I know this boy. He's one of us."

In a more profound way when we are baptized, God holds us close and says,

"I know this one. I called this one by name.

This one belongs to me. Fear not."

PRECIOUS LORD, TAKE MY HAND

A minister of a church in a dangerous part of town told of a member who seemed to have no fear about coming to meetings and services at the church at night. She had no car and would have to walk home at night through those frightening streets.

One night after a prayer service at which this woman had been present the minister was locking up the church and happened to see this woman walking down the street to her apartment. As she walked she was holding her hand out as if some unseen companion were walking with her.

The minister heard her humming a familiar spiritual, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on. hold my hand, lest I fall. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home."

We are at the beginning of a new year. And we are not so sure if it will be good or bad.

No one knows if the stock market will take another tumble. No one knows if the unemployed will find a job. No one knows when terror may strike again. No one knows if this will be a year of personal tragedy.

But, this we do know. God has not abandoned us. We are baptized. We have been called by name. We are loved. We are blessed by God. And God in Christ has promised to be with us always ... even until the end of the age.

When the waters rise God will lift us up to higher ground. When the fires of life threaten to burn us, God will douse the flames.

In a dangerous and difficult world we walk by faith and not by sight. We reach out our hand and say, "Precious Lord, take my hand. Lead me on. Let me stand."

And that will be enough. After all, if God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31)
Don't be afraid.

Remember your baptism.

Amen.