

**First Sunday after Epiphany
(First Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

Isaiah 43:1-7 is a poem of hope in which God says to a defeated, exiled people, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine” (43:1b). This is the primary message of what must be one of the most beautiful and deeply moving poems in scripture.

The author of this passage uses some key words or phrases in this promise – key statements to which we must pay attention. Firstly, he states to a still captive Israel, “do not fear”. Those words make up the primary phrase that moves like a refrain through Isaiah 40-55. It is a reminder to Israel that, although their present reality of exile in a foreign nation seems bleak indeed, God is on the move and will bring about both their liberation from Babylon and their restoration to their beloved Promised Land.

Secondly, the author specifically has God say, “I have redeemed you”. The word “redeemed” is used infrequently elsewhere in the Old Testament in reference to God (only in Job 19:25; Pss. 19:14; 78:35 and Jer. 50:34). But it is used a total of ten times in Isaiah 40-66. It is therefore obviously an important concept to the author of Isaiah.

When we Christians hear the word “redemption”, we automatically think of the act of sacrifice by Jesus on the cross that brought about our salvation. But that is only an adaptation of the word. “Redeem” actually means “to buy back” or “to repossess”, and it is primarily and in its origins an economic term. It means to free one from a legal or financial obligation by a transaction or agreement that takes place. Because of its economic roots, therefore, it is rarely used of God’s actions (see the above paragraph), but is often used of a person – such as the “kinsman redeemer” in the book of Ruth (where it is used 20 times in that contest).

Thus, for Isaiah to have God say, “I have redeemed you” is to have God declare, “I have bought you back”. The Israelites have suffered in their exile and captivity, but God has acted to set them free through Persia, so that God has “bought them back” and has now “repossessed” them. Consequently, they have once again become God’s “property” and belong to Him. And what He chooses to do with his property is to banish all their fear and to return them to the Promised Land!

Thirdly, the writer has God declare, “I have called you by name; you are mine”. When we hear the phrase, “I have called you by name”, we interpret that to mean that God takes note of or recognizes us, and thus gives credibility to us. That is what we assume the author is saying God has done to Israel. But that is a modern reading of that phrase; it is not what that phrase meant in fifth century BCE Israel.

The phrase, “I have called you by name” is used frequently in Isaiah 40-55 (40:26; 43:1; 44:5; 45:3-4; 48:1). It is a technical term used for indicating the establishment of sovereignty over a person. For a king to “call you by name” means that the king has selected you from his court to bring you under both his protection and his authority. For a superior (in this case, God) to call someone by name means that the one who names the other is declaring sovereignty over that one

so named. The person named now comes under that sovereign's protection but is also under his authority and is therefore accountable to the overlord. That this is the sense of that phrase is confirmed by the parallel construction of Israelite poetry (in which the same truth is said twice but with different words) by following the phrase, "I have called you by name" with the phrase, "You are mine"! In other words, you, Israel, now belong to God!

Thus, in this simple statement, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine", God is promising a great deal to Israel. God is telling them not to live in fear because God has brought Israel back and repossessed them, making them his property. He has established his sovereignty over them so that they now live under his protection and authority. So, now that God "owns" them and has reclaimed them as his sovereign subjects, there is no reason why they should fear the power of Babylon, Persia or any other nation or god than Yahweh!

But a message of "do not fear" impacts the hearer of that message in direct proportion to whom it is giving that instruction. If one does not have the power to protect the person who is being told, "do not fear", then that promise is hollow. If, on the other hand, it is an extremely powerful person making that promise, the promise can be received with great trust, hope and conviction. Who is it, then, who instructs captive Israel not to fear?

The promise begins, "But now thus says Yahweh; he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel, 'Do not fear'" (vs. 1a). This is no mere mortal speaking this assurance to Israel – whether peasant, priest or king. This is Yahweh Himself making this promise. And who is Yahweh? He is the creator of the world. He is the One who shaped Israel and brought it into being. And He is the One who brings each and every one of God's people into existence. This, consequently, is One who can deliver, and therefore can be trusted!

After the prophet presents God's promise to Israel, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine", the writer continues through verse 7 presenting the evidence for why Israel should not fear the new thing God is doing to bring about their redemption, their liberation from slavery and their restoration to their Promised Land.

Not only is Yahweh God the creator of the universe, the world and of Israel, the author of Isaiah declares; he is also the deliverer of Israel in the Exodus. "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 of Israel, your Savior" (43:2-3a).

Consider what Isaiah is stating here. "I am the Lord your God" is a direct quotation from the most formative document coming from the Exodus – the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2). "When you pass through the waters" is a reference to Israel's crossing of the Red Sea, as they were miraculously delivered by Yahweh from almost certain annihilation by Pharaoh's army. "When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned" refers to the means by which God delivered Israel from Pharaoh's wrath, the cloud of fire that swept down in front of the charging Egyptian army and held them at bay until all the Israelites had made good their escape. "When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" is a reference to Yahweh's division

of the Jordan River so that the Israelites might cross on dry ground into the Canaan that would become their inheritance.

In other words, what God is saying to Israel through this poem is that Yahweh is not only the creator of the world. He is also the One who controls history and who led Israel out of that slavery inflicted by the most powerful nation in the world. If God could both create them and shape history to bring about their liberation, can they not trust him now to liberate, redeem and “call them by name”?

Thus, God concludes in this poem, “Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 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 – everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made” (vss. 5-7).

God is giving a great assurance to Israel here. He is saying, “I am presently on the move to liberate you and to return you to Israel. And those whom I liberate will not only be those who have been exiles in Babylonia (“the east”), but also Israelites who might have been enslaved by any regime anywhere (“Egypt, Ethiopia, Seba” – vs. 3b; the “west, north and south” – vs. 6). God will bring about a new creation – the third creation following the creation of the earth and the creation of an old Israel from Egyptian slavery. This will be a third creation – God’s new creation of God’s people. And he will achieve this new creation by ingathering all of God’s people from around the world, who will be liberated from oppression, exploitation and domination, who will be purchased back and redeemed by God and who will return to God’s new Jerusalem to begin the building of the world as God intended it to be!

Psalm 29 describes a great thunderstorm, and how that thunderstorm became a means of standing in awe and worship before God.

The psalm begins, “Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendor” (vss. 1-2). These words announce the beginning of the psalm – actually, a call to worship God. But what does the author mean by the phrase “O heavenly beings”?

The Hebrew is literally, “sons of God”. It could mean one of three things. First, it could be a call to minor deities to worship Yahweh. There is no way to know when this psalm was written. If it were written before the Exile, then it is possible that this is an ascription to other “minor” gods. The ancient Israelites were not monotheists, but rather viewed Yahweh as the immensely-supreme God over all (“minor” gods); thus, their opposition to Ba’al was not God versus “no-god”, but the deity Yahweh was proven vastly superior to the deity Ba’al (e.g., I Kings 18:20-40, Psalms 82:1; 84:7; 86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 97:7-9; 135:5; 136:2; 138:1). So if this psalm was written at this time, it could be instructing the “sons (or minor deities) of God” to stand in awe before Yahweh.

If the psalm was written after the exile, this could be a reference to angels. By that time, the Israelites were truly monotheistic so that “sons of God” had been reduced to religious beings created by Yahweh (Psalms 89:7; 103:20; 148:2). Or a third alternative would be to see the reference as being a reference to human beings (see Psalm 82:6 as a comparable example).

Whoever it is to whom the Psalmist is referring, the importance of this Psalm lies in what he feels ought to be the reaction of these beings in the face of what has to be an almost-cataclysmic thunderstorm. The Psalmist’s instruction is for Israel (and these “gods”) to ascribe to God the power of this storm. Its thunder, its lightning, its wind, the fires it creates, the landslides resulting from the pounding rain are all to be “ascribed” to the Lord, and are manifestations of his “glory and strength”, his “holy splendor”.

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, Glory” (vss. 3-9).

Thus, the Psalmist ends with the affirmation that this God, indeed, is king of the cosmos, Lord and master of all that is. “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace” (vss. 10-11)!

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 deals with two distinct topics. The first topic is John’s announcement of the coming of “One who is more powerful than I”.(3:15-17). The second presents a description of the actual coming of this One (3:21-22).

In the first account, John the Baptist intentionally points the crowd away from himself and toward Jesus. He announces that “One who is more powerful than I” is coming soon. Whereas John baptizes with water, this wilderness prophet declares that there is One coming who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. Although he may be highly respected as a prophet, John is “not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals” of the One who is to come.

That third statement – that John is “not worthy to untie the thong” of Jesus’ sandals – is a particularly notable statement. In Jesus’ and John’s time, learning did not occur for adults through their attending a school. Rather a person would ask a rabbi if he could “sit at the feet” of that respected authority and be mentored by him. Normally, one would not pay one’s rabbi for learning in this way. Rather, the student was expected to perform services for the rabbi at no charge. The one service no student would accept, however, was to loose or remove the rabbi’s sandals. That would be considered far too menial of a task for even a student to do. Therefore, for John to declare that he was unworthy to untie the sandals of the One who was to come was for him to declare that the One coming was so superior to John that it was too high a task to even perform this unacceptable task towards his rabbi, Jesus.

Luke has John end his comparison of his ministry and of Jesus' ministry with the words, "His (that is, the One who is to come) 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" (3:17). The imagery that John is using here, of course, is the end of the harvesting process. The harvested wheat, husks and weeds are dumped upon the flat threshing floor. The weeds are separated from the wheat and are burned. The wheat, in its husks, is then beaten; that beating separates the wheat itself from the husks that protected it. Then the grain is tossed into the air, over and over again. Because the husks are lighter than the wheat, the wind blows them to the edges of the threshing floor while the heavier wheat falls onto the center of the floor. The wheat is then gathered and taken to the granary for sale, while the husks (or chaff) are swept up and burned.

This is what the One who is to come will do, John is telling the people. You think it was difficult to publicly undergo baptism with water, confessing your cooperation with and your cooption by the political, economic and religious powers to accept their domination of you and your consequent domination of those around you? Well, the One who is to come will "baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". He will be a revolutionary figure, separating the exploiters from the people, gathering the people into his kingdom ("gather the wheat into his granary") while destroying exploiting leaders and followers of the systems ("the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"). Therefore, although the One's coming will be reason for rejoicing to some, it will be exceedingly bad news for those who have made profit off of the people by exploiting, oppressing and controlling them!

Luke then makes his second point. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and 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"." (3:21-22)

What is intriguing about Luke's account of Jesus' baptism is the little attention he gives to it. That baptism is carefully explored in both Matthew (3:13-17) and Mark (1:9-11). But in Luke, it is almost stated as an afterthought. Luke's account of Jesus' baptism doesn't even deserve its own sentence. Rather, it is simply tagged onto a statement about the people being baptized: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized . . ."

Those seven short words is all the space that Luke gives to Jesus' baptism! Why? It is because Luke wants to draw the reader's attention, not to Jesus' baptism, but to what follows the baptism.

The emphasis in Luke is on Jesus' endowment with the Holy Spirit that "descended upon him in bodily form like a dove". Jesus will later declare in what is arguably the most important passage in the Gospel of Luke – Luke 4:18-19 – "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (or "has come upon me"). That passage, as we will discover on the third Sunday after Epiphany, was Jesus' clearest statement of the mission to which He had been called by the Father. He will claim in 4:18 that God's Spirit has come down upon him to call him to the mission he describes in verses 18 and 19. Here, in 3:22, Luke wants you to visually see that anointing by God's Spirit on which Jesus builds his case for the unique mission that will separate the wheat from the chaff of both Israel

and the world. Luke is the only gospel writer to declare that “the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove”. The words “in bodily form” are integral to Luke’s argument here. The Matthew and Mark accounts declare that *Jesus* saw the Spirit come as a dove upon him, implying that no one else saw it. But Luke is the only gospel writer to declare that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus “*in bodily form like a dove*” – an action that all who witnessed his baptism saw! What all could see happen at Jesus’ baptism, all can later hear Jesus declare – that the mission to which he was called was not one he decided to do, but to which he was inevitably chosen, blessed and dedicated by God, in which he will be broken through his death as he faithfully seeks to carry out that mission and for which he will be given for the sake of the world!

Luke then concludes this remarkable story that demonstrates Jesus’ mission call, “And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”” (3:22b). Again, the implication is that everyone hears this voice from heaven confirming Jesus’ call. It is not an announcement that only Jesus hears (the implication of Matthew and Mark).

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”. These words are significant, and represent God’s choice of Jesus as clearly as does the Holy Spirit coming down upon him.

This is a statement of Jesus’ chosenness by God. God calls him, “my Son”, “my Beloved”. He is not simply “Messiah” (the question asked of John in vs. 15), but Jesus is God’s son, the Beloved! The word “Beloved” is meant as a synonym for “Son”, following the Jewish poetic use of parallel statements. The Greek word actually means “dearest beloved” or “most beloved”.

As Henri Nouwan so beautifully puts it, “I have called you by name, from the very beginning. You are mine and I am yours. You are my Beloved, on you my favor rests. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child. I have counted every hair on your head and guided you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you. You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your brother, your sister, your lover and your spouse. Wherever you are I will be. Nothing will ever separate us. We are one!”¹

But what does it mean to be the beloved? What does it mean to be God’s son? God answers that question in Luke 3:22 by concluding the sentence, “with you I am well pleased”. According to Luke, for God to be “well-pleased” with Jesus means, that he will be taken, blessed, broken and given for the world. Later on, in Luke 9:10-17, the author will tell us that, faced with 5,000 hungry men (along with women and children), Jesus *took* five loaves and two fish, “and *blessed* and *broke* them, and *gave* them to his disciples to set before the crowd” (9:16). “Took” (or

¹ Henri Nouwan, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), pp. 30-31. Nouwen wrote this to describe how each of us is God’s beloved, but it is an excellent biblical statement of what being the beloved actually means – and therefore can be applied to God’s use of the word for Jesus (note, for example, now many of the statements are either direct Old Testament references or allusions in its description of the beloved).

“chose”), “blessed”, “broke”, and “gave”. Again, Luke has Jesus repeat the same pattern at the Last Supper (12:19). Once again, in the story of the resurrected Jesus’ walk with two disciples to Emmaus, Luke repeats the same pattern (24:30) of bread (the Bread of Life?) being taken, blessed, broken and given to his disciples.

This is what it means to be God’s “beloved” – to be chosen by God for the liberation and redemption (see the Old Testament lesson) of the world, to be blessed as God’s “bread” to the world, to be broken upon the cross and to be given so that humanity can be transformed! And that commission is given to Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry – in fact, before his ministry actually begins – as God uses the occasion of his baptism to declare to the world through sign (a bodily dove), deed (his baptism) and word (“You are my Son, the Beloved”) that here is the One whom John has declared will winnow all Israel and all humanity, bringing about through his mission and calling the return of the world and its occupants to God’s intentions for it.

Acts 8:14-17 is a part of that chronicle of the earliest history of the church written by Luke, the author of the Third Gospel as a continuation of that gospel story as lived out in the real world. This passage tells us that the earliest Christians, huddled in Jerusalem, hear that people in the city of Samaria “had accepted the word of God” and had been “baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (8:14, 16). The apostles send Peter and John to check on the report. They discover that what has been reported to the church is true: these Samaritans had heard the gospel, embraced Jesus Christ and had been baptized. But the principal sign that they had authentically been converted, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, had not been experienced by them. Therefore, Luke tells us, “Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit”!

Here, Luke returns to the theme that he first stressed near the beginning of his Gospel. Proclaiming the gospel is important; responding to God’s redeeming (see our Old Testament lesson) love is important, being baptized is important. But God’s redemptive and liberating work in us is not complete until we “receive the Holy Spirit”!

What Luke is presenting here once again is a theme that permeates both of his books. Christianity is not, in the final analysis, a body of doctrine, correct theological beliefs, or obedient and blameless actions. It is to become God’s “beloved”. It is to enter into and continue in a dynamic relationship with God that spills over into all your relationships with all people and with all human society. It is understanding yourself as one who has been chosen and called by God, continuously blessed by God’s love, reaching out to the pain and abuse of the world that breaks one’s heart, and giving away your life for the transformation of the world around you. It is a journey inward of a growing, intimate relationship with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. But it is equally a journey outward, giving away that relationship to the world as you seek to be a “little Christ” to it. It is not just being converted. It is not just being baptized. It is about being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, making your life dynamic, power-filled and seeking the transformation of the world. That is what Christianity is all about!