
Fear Not, I Love You

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Feast of the Baptism of Jesus - Epiphany I
Luke 3:15-17

A week ago I sat with a friend who is also preaching today. After reading the lessons together, I have been haunted by a song I learned on a retreat based on our text from Isaiah. I catch myself singing it in the shower and in my car, while doing housework and walking my dogs. The melody is based on a Jewish tune while the music is beautiful the words are powerful, I remember them from the King James Version of the Bible.

"Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine," 2

I love these words; they are comforting, filled with hope and images of a God who is bound to his people in companionship through all kinds of adversity. The themes are grounded in the covenant language of Israel. Amazingly, Isaiah speaks these words on behalf of the Lord to a remnant of the people of Judah while in exile in Babylon. The picture Isaiah paints is one of a glorious future for the people of God. But I wonder how they, a weary people held in captivity, heard Isaiah's poem.

You may remember that the Israelites were led to the Promised Land from Egyptian bondage, establishing their nation in the middle of trade routes that moved goods from the Far East to the Mediterranean, goods destined for cities in Greece and Egypt. Many great nations rose and eventually declined as the center of power shifted among them. The Assyrians dominated the area for a while and the 10 northern tribes disappeared, leaving the last two southern tribes in Judah. As the Babylonian empire asserted its power, Judah and Jerusalem fell and much of the population, especially the educated, artisans, priests, and merchants were taken back to Babylon.

Now, several generations have been born in a foreign land, away from the destroyed Temple, cut off from the Promised Land and their kinfolk, relying on the stories of the past glory of Israel to keep them united, waiting to return home.

With the passing of time I wonder what questions they might have pondered in their hearts. Who are we? Where do we belong? What are we called to be and to do?

This (morning?) afternoon we hear this beautiful passage without having heard the indictment against God's people in chapter 42 of Isaiah. The people have been a disappointment, they have failed to live up to their calling and distinctiveness as God's chosen people, they have failed at justice and so become the plunder of other nations. These harsh words are connected to our passage by the words, "But Now."

But now God is promising something new. In the opening verse of the poem, Isaiah ties together creation and redemption, creation and re-creation. In this promise, the Jewish captives are reminded of their identity. At the center of the monologue

is God's reason for establishing his relationship with this particular people. "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." They are God's precious ones - his beloved!

In his words, Isaiah paints a picture of perfect grace. God does not require anything of the people - no confession, no repentance, no good deeds, nothing, God simply reaches out to them and reminds them that he loves them with an everlasting love. They may fail in their responsibilities and they may suffer the consequences of failure, but they will never be left alone - in every trial and tribulation God is with them.

The love God offers us is wondrous and at the same time often hard to accept. It challenges us when we do not feel loved or lovable. When our past mistakes overwhelm us - like a flood washing away our hope - how do we accept what we do not feel worthy to receive? In these moments we often forget who we are. We live in an age that can be characterized as an age of identity crisis. We search for our identity - we look for it in our families, our careers, our education, even in our vocations in the church - forgetting that our identity is given to us in baptism,

Today we remember and celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, his submission to the baptism of John in the Jordan. All four of our gospels describe this story with only slight nuances in the details, giving us reason to pay attention to this pivotal event in the life of our Lord. I believe the most important aspect of the story is the declaration of God the Father after Jesus is baptized "you are my beloved Son, my precious one, I honor you with my love.

As Christians we too are plunged in the sacred waters of baptism, drowned to our past failings and mistakes and, joining Christ in the waters, we are raised with him to hear the words - you are my beloved, you are precious to me. It is in baptism that we find our true identity as the beloved people of God. Love is God's gift to us; there is nothing we can do to earn it and nothing we fail to do will cause God to take it away. There is no quid pro quo in the economy of grace. In our receiving love we become gifted people - called to become like God, loving freely and extravagantly, giving love away without expectations.

This story is not simply a pollyanna - God calls a people through fire and water from exile in the four corners of the world. The fire and the water, the floods of the human predicament, will not disappear, but God brings us through them and God's faithfulness is unswerving. I believe God accomplishes the ingathering of the people through you and me. It is the call we receive in baptism and the response we make in our promises to God in our baptismal covenant:

By our faithfulness to the Apostle's teaching, fellowship, and the breaking of bread,
By our willingness to return to God after each failure to receive God's continuing love and support,
By proclaiming the good news of God's love in Christ in word and action,
By finding Christ in the face of our neighbors,
By striving each day for justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human being.
This is our response to love; this is our calling, this is our identity as bearers of God's love to the world.

Let me close with the words from another passage from the Hebrew Scriptures:

"It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you" for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you," Deut. 7:7-8.

So my Brothers and Sisters, Fear not, for God has redeemed and called you each by name, his beloved sons and daughters. Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Buddy Crawford at: bcrawford@stphilipscathedral.org.