

“Precious”  
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Isaiah 43:1-7 Sermon  
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For Private Distribution Only

An anonymous author known by scholars as Second Isaiah wrote these words to exiles in Babylon in the middle of the sixth century BCE, just as the international tide was turning and the possibility of returning to the broken city of Jerusalem was reopening. And so Second Isaiah soars with poetic hope, offering to pave the way homeward with confidence and expectancy. Probably a big part of what makes these words so uniquely comforting is that they are spoken by God in the first person: “I have called you by name;” “I will be with you;” “I love you.” Some pretty powerful stuff. Now imagine hearing these words from the vantage point of the captives for whom they were originally intended. Hard to do from where we sit, but we can get a glimpse into an earlier Hebrew experience of destruction and captivity through the Assyrian Lachish frieze. This relief includes images of soldiers impaled on enemy spears and children guided out of a burning city by parents in chains, who are carrying all that they can in their hands.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, captives needed to know that God had not deserted them, and that there was, indeed, a future beyond the violence and the shame to which they had been subjected. And God delivered.

Yet there are some troublesome bits here too. In the chapter before this one, God is an angry warrior who has given up these descendents of Jacob to their enemies as punishment for failure to listen and obey. And then in today’s reading God promises to ransom Egypt and sacrifice other nations in order to redeem God’s chosen people. But the truth is that, at other times, God did and will redeem other peoples. And, right in the text, God has claimed every one and thing that God has made as God’s own, worthy of divine love and redemption. I also think it’s always important to bear in mind that, although we find divine truth and inspiration in the bible, written

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<sup>1</sup>Patricia Tull: “Commentary on First Reading,” *Working Preacher*, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org), January 2013.

as it was by human hands, we also find human brokenness. It goes without saying that this portrayal of God arises out of a violent context. I would venture to guess that verbal and physical abuse was occurring within the captives' homes, as well as at the hands of their enemies. For the way this god is described has the classic marks of abuse: first punishing children and spouses angrily and mercilessly; then making amends with the most tender and loving of words, acts, and promises. We all must wear the lenses of our life experiences, and so surely there were times that the biblical authors could not help but project their personal histories onto their writing; even as the Jewish peoples' attempts to make theological sense of their nation's history couldn't help but venture into the familiar territory of domestic neglect and abuse. Even today we continue to ask "Why?" when tragedy strikes, and we are challenged to be satisfied with the unknowable, with the reality that bad stuff just happens and isn't necessarily willed into being by God either to punish or to teach... If we truly believe that God is love, unblemished and uncompromised, then we must also believe that God would never harm us, but in fact stands with us in times when we are ravaged by flood or fire, natural disaster or human violence. It may not be within God's power to prevent bad things from happening to us, but God never leaves or forsakes us, no matter how rough the going gets.

"Don't fear, ...I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine."

And yet, how hard it is for us to hold on to that reality. How easy it is to let our anxieties get the better of us. To share our fears with others in ways which heighten the anxiety and cause it to spread like wildfire. To be the Fox News Channels of our own lives... We live in a culture that thrives on fear, insecurity, and drama, and so likely these are inevitable pieces of the lenses we

walk around wearing today. But these fears are projected, and they are not of God. God has told us straight up, “Don’t fear. You are mine.”

How many of us know what it feels like to be deemed precious? To be honored? To be loved by God? We all are. Each one of us. Precious. Honored. Loved. Regardless of marital status, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, appearance, ability, or income level. Whomever and wherever we are on life’s journey. Precious. Honored. Loved. ...But so many of us spend so many of our days not truly experiencing these realities. One way or another we are seeking...and often looking for higher love in all the wrong places. Expecting our belongings or our intellectual pursuits or our physical strengths, our perfectionism or our human relationships to fill us up and make us whole. Some of us have had very challenging childhoods and relationships that have left us feeling like the walking wounded. And so we may look to each other to get what is lacking inside. And while we can be supportive of one another on our journeys toward wholeness, we, too, are only human. Nothing we can say or do to or for one another will completely fill the void. Sometimes we will say or do the wrong things...or at least they may be perceived as the wrong things when they bump up against raw wounds and insecurities. Feelings will be hurt where no harm was intended or, in truth, actually conveyed.

Both North African bishop St. Augustine and French philosopher Blaise Pascal are credited with introducing the idea that each one of us possesses a “God-shaped hole” or a “God-shaped vacuum.” Augustine put it this way: “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless, until it rests in you.” While Pascal said it like this: “The infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.” When we try to fill that abyss with anything but God, we will be disappointed.

When we leave God out of our healing and self actualization process, we will be disappointed. We belong to God. God loves and yearns for us. God wants us to return that love and has therefore given us hearts which long for that depth of connection.

Admittedly, it's hard to walk through our days feeling precious and loved in a world that is constantly telling us we're not good enough. If only we lost some weight, smoothed our wrinkles, wore the right labels, and drove the right car. ...Even if we finally manage to attain those things, the rules are always changing. Tomorrow it will be something completely different. We'll be a dollar short and out of style. But, more importantly, we'll have discovered that superficial things only made us feel good for about two seconds, give or take. Just like a compliment or an affirmation can instantly be canceled out by a criticism, no matter how well intended or constructive.

Often we forget that, in words attributed to French Jesuit priest and philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and many others, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience." Our spirits are delicate butterflies, which, while seeking out God, can't help but bump up against life's sometimes hard edges.

Certainly we are not captives in the sense that Second Isaiah's people were. But, without a sense of the love and esteem in which God holds us, we can inadvertently allow ourselves to feel like helpless, chained captives in our own lives. That's the illusion, but, if we're not careful, it can come to feel like the bitter reality. And that's as true for us as individuals as it is for us as a community. For Second Isaiah's words were written to an entire nation of captives. But God wills for us, as God did for the Jewish captives, that we might be filled with the hope,

confidence, and expectancy that come only from God. And that we might long deeply for these things.

And so, as we prepare to gather as a community of faith downstairs and make some very important decisions about the future of this church, let us listen closely to the words of Second Isaiah once more. I would invite you to close your eyes, plant your feet firmly on the floor, and get comfortable so that you can absorb these words into every pore of your being. After I finish reading, we will spend a few moments in silence digesting them. When I say, “Amen,” that will be your invitation to open your eyes and come back to the sanctuary renewed.

Isaiah 43:1-7 (Common English Bible)

But now, says the LORD—  
the one who created you, Jacob,  
the one who formed you, Israel:  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched  
and flame won't burn you.  
I am the LORD your God,  
the holy one of Israel, your savior.  
I have given Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in your place.  
Because you are precious in my eyes,  
you are honored, and I love you.  
I give people in your place,  
and nations in exchange for your life.  
Don't fear,  
I am with you.  
From the east I'll bring your children;  
from the west I'll gather you.  
I'll say to the north, "Give them back!"  
and to the south, "Don't detain them."  
Bring my sons from far away,  
and my daughters from the end of the earth,  
everyone who is called by my name  
and whom I created for my glory,  
whom I have formed and made. ....Amen.