

“We Belong to God”
January 12, 2025
Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

That reading from Isaiah is one of my favorite passages of scripture. I’ve often used it, or part of it, during funerals. It offers comfort and assurance during times of loss that I’ve always found helpful. What I especially like about it is it doesn’t try to claim that God will protect us from harm. It doesn’t say that God offers some kind of insurance against damage. It assumes we will encounter times of deep water and fiery trouble. And anyone who has lived in the world knows that’s what happens in this life. We all experience difficulties and disappointments, even hardships and deprivations at one time or another. They’re unavoidable.

What God promises through Isaiah isn’t protection but presence. “I will be with you....The flame shall not consume you.” There have been times in my life when it felt like that’s all I had to hang onto. And I suspect that’s true for some of you as well. These words offer not an alternative reality but a perspective on our circumstances that assures us that what we’re experiencing isn’t everything we are. There’s more to us than our losses and disappointments. And even when it seems as though we’re meant for nothing but calamity, God makes a claim on us: “I have called you by name, you are mine.”

As I think about that I’m reminded of so many times when really hearing that and internalizing it could have made a difference in people’s lives. Certainly, there are some who have been rejected by family or friends who fall into despair. But I’ve known many families who have lost a loved one to suicide who are devastated and confused over how it could happen when they’ve been told they are loved. We can’t control how someone we love will accept our expressions of care and affection. Sometimes even when it’s made clear that they’re loved, they just cannot hear it. So, having words like these from Isaiah, this clear expression of God’s love, can be a challenge.

For the people who first heard them, they may have rung hollow. Isaiah speaks these words into Israel’s experience of exile. They’ve been forced from their homes and their country; they’ve seen the devastation of their capital city, Jerusalem, and the destruction of the temple. It was humiliating and demoralizing. They were completely defeated and their defeat meant the failure of their God. For them, life would never be the same. I like to think these words were comforting for them, and they may have been for some, but I imagine it took some time, maybe a generation, before they could really embrace them.

It’s not always clear that God is with us. It certainly wouldn’t have been to the Israelites carried into exile. But this isn’t the only expression of God’s love. Scripture offers countless examples of God reaching out to the people with love and grace. And for us the ultimate expression of that is in Jesus. His birth and life, his death and resurrection, the whole gospel story, is meant to tell us we belong to God.

Jesus’ baptism is that moment in the gospel when God makes a claim on us. Jesus enters our reality by acknowledging that claim in the waters of the Jordan. Whenever something

happens at the Jordan in the Bible, by the way, it's important to pay attention. The Jordan represents the boundary between old and new, between death and life. In his baptism Jesus moves from one phase of existence to another as God's Beloved. And by following Jesus we acknowledge our inclusion in that identity; we acknowledge we belong to God.

Baptism doesn't create that relationship. Like so much else we do in the Church baptism is an outward acknowledgement of an inner reality. The reality is: we belong to God. God's love for us is unconditional whether we acknowledge it or not. Think of it like gravity; it's always there and nothing we do can eliminate it. Yet most of the time we aren't really aware of it (God's love, I mean). That's not something to be ashamed of or that we should beat ourselves up over. It's hard to move through life with all the pressures and demands constantly aware of God's love. But every now and then it's important to take a step back, to gain a new perspective on our circumstances and remember we aren't alone in our troubles.

Just like the Israelites needed to be reminded, in no uncertain terms, that God was with them through all that they endured, so do we need to remember we are more than the losses and difficulties we go through. Our disappointments and shortcomings do not define us. We belong to God, no matter what we go through, no matter how deep the water or how hot the fire. And that connects us not just to our spiritual ancestors but to every other person and creature. We all belong to God. I believe that while Jesus is a unique expression of God's love, he is not the exclusive expression of it. God's love is communicated in countless ways, through every spiritual tradition. But we can only begin appreciating that when we fully accept it in our own tradition. When we embrace God's love for us fully, we can see that love revealed all around us.

That's why today you're invited to embrace God's love through the renewal of baptism. I realize there may be some here who haven't been baptized and I don't mean for this to be a substitute for that. Today is a chance for all of us to acknowledge that we belong to God. You may be carrying an immensely heavy burden of disappointment or loss, and you might feel abandoned by God. Today you're invited to take a step toward sharing that burden. Let yourself acknowledge God's love for you, even though the water you're in is still deep and turbulent. You're not alone. God's love is there for you. You belong to God.

You're invited today to come forward, no matter what your circumstances, and receive an anointing of oil on your forehead and to remember God is with you and you are not alone. Please turn in your bulletin to the liturgy for renewal of baptism and anointing and receive God's love.