

BUT NOW...

Holden Evening Prayer Around the World

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Lesson

Isaiah 43:1-7

Prayer of the Day

May our prayers come before you, O God, as incense, and may your presence surround and fill us, so that in union with all creation, we might sing your praise and your love in our lives. Amen.



Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.¹ Amen.

*But now thus says the Lord,
who created you, O Jacob,
who formed you, O Israel:*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

These words, from the 43rd chapter of Isaiah, were spoken to the people of God, as they were held captive in Babylon, more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. I've had a fascination with this era in the history of God's people. As a matter of fact: I look forward to the season of Advent every year; a season when we regularly turn our attention to the Prophet Isaiah and the people of his day.



¹ Romans 1:7, 1st Corinthians 1:3, 2nd Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1st Thessalonians 1:1, 2nd Thessalonians 1:2, Philemon 3; New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

These words are spoken to a people who had lived through hard years in Babylon. Abducted, abused, removed from their homes. Separated from everything they loved; everything familiar; everything that had made for life. Made to live in bondage; no longer free in almost every respect. To fool a bit with Saint Peter's words: once they were God's people, and now they are no people. ²

This could very easily have changed how they understood themselves. Their life and their heritage had been tied to their land, their nation, their history, the physical manifestation of God's favor. How can they continue to be a people when all this is gone? What does it mean to be the people of God in a different land and a different day; in so many ways disconnected with what had come before?

Isaiah 43 doesn't deny the pain and reality of their experience. It has been nothing less than devastating. "But now..." Isaiah says, "But now... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... I will be with you... You are precious in my sight and honored... I love you." ³

In spite of all evidence to the contrary, the people of Jacob — the people of Israel — are not the despised slaves of Babylon. They belong to no one but God. God who loves them with a fierce and unending love. God who promises to journey with them whatever path they find themselves walking. God who accompanies them through the valley of the shadow of death, and up the mountain of Transfiguration. After years of pain and humiliation, these words of Isaiah come to them as promise. And comfort. And assurance that this too will end. "But now... do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

These are the words that allow the people of Jacob — the people of Israel — to remember who they are, and whose they are.

As are these words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the (†) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." ⁴

It is in these waters and these words that we too find our identity. It is in these waters and these words that we too receive the promise of God. It is in these waters and these words that we too experience God as one who loves us with a fierce and unending love. God who promises to journey with us, no matter where the path may lead. Through the valley, up the mountain, and beyond.

We have a relatively new tradition here at Saint Peter — it grew out of a children's message I shared with our kids a year or two ago at Christmas time. As they come to sit with me on the chancel steps each Sunday morning, we sing them forward with these words:

² "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." 1 Peter 2:10; New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.

³ Isaiah 43:1, 2a, 4a, New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.

⁴ Holy Baptism; Evangelical Lutheran Worship (© 2006 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Published by Augsburg Fortress, Publishers) page 231.

If anybody asks you who I am; who I am; who I am,
If anybody asks you who I am, tell `em I`m a child of God. ⁵

We may understand our identity as having to do with groups that include us or beliefs we have embraced. Others who have some knowledge of us may attempt to confine us to one box or another. Race, gender, education, politics, economics; these realities may be used in an attempt to divide us; to convince us that we ought to understand ourselves by the differences we represent. But we know better, don't we? If anybody asks you who I am, tell `em I`m a child of God. One who has been washed clean in Christ. One who has been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the sign of the cross. One who has received the promise of God. One who has heard these words: The road may be difficult, the path may be rocky, we may not know its ending, "But now..." God says, "But now... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine... I will be with you... You are precious in my sight and honored... I love you."

Ultimately, it is God's promise that establishes who we are. It provides our identity. It gives to us a future with hope. It calls us to lives of faithfulness. It enlightens our path. It empowers our witness and service. And for all of this we surely ought to thank, praise, serve and obey.

Can I have an Amen?

Amen!

David J. Risendal, Pastor

Lesson

- ^{43:1} 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.
- 2 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.
- 3 For 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.
- 4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,

⁵ Child of God. Traditional, spiritual. "American Folk Songs for Christmas" assembled by composer/folklorist Ruth Crawford Seeger, from Library of Congress field recordings, old manuscripts and WPA collections in the 1940s, and recorded by her children and grandchildren. © Rounder Select (September 16, 1992).

I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

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

⁶ Isaiah 43:1-7, New Revised Standard Version Bible, opp. cit.