

# ***Created, Formed, Redeemed, & Called***

Isaiah 43:1-7

Rev. David Lower

Winnetka Presbyterian Church

January 10, 2009

## **Isaiah 43:1-7 (NRSV)**

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. 2When 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. 3For 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. 4Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. 5Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6I 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— 7everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

## **Luke 3:15-22 (NRSV)**

15As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His 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." 18So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. 19But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, 20added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

21Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and 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."

We hear this morning two voices of God's claim and love, expressed hundreds of years apart, to communities and people in struggle. Chapter 43 of Isaiah was written when the Jews were in exile, defeated, and separated from their homes, their great temple, each other, and their God. Into this context of dislocation and darkness come words from the Lord through a prophet. Imagine hearing these words from God in your deepest moment of darkness, at your moment of lowest hope: "I created you, I formed you, do not fear for I have redeemed you, called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, when you walk through fire, I will be with you. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, and I would do anything to bring you home."

And several hundred years later, at the time of Jesus Christ, Roman power and religious division and corruption were themes of the day, and the result for most well-meaning, everyday Jews was a feeling of dislocation, disconnection, loneliness, and absence of God. Their tradition promised a Messiah, a promised one who would restore the greatness of Israel and the people, but after several hundred years many had given up on that as nonsense. Even the one proclaiming baptism and the coming of the Lord, John, would soon be in prison for even hinting at good news for the people. It was again, in a context of struggle and anguish, that the voice of the Lord spoke to Jesus.

So when the claims of baptism are ritualized and rehearsed, as we will do this morning, we should always remember the contexts out of which they were born, struggle and dislocation and disconnection, because they are often the contexts in which God's baptismal promises find us. They may find us this morning, some of us, with a heart full of grief, having lost someone that you have loved dearly. Some of us struggling with disappointments about the past. Some of us with anxiety and even doubt about what

tomorrow may bring. Will I be able to pay my bills? What will the doctor say? Will she love me? Can I be forgiven? Did I pass? Why can't I stop?

It is at precisely THIS moment, this anxious, tense, uncertain moment, that the HEAVEN WAS OPENED, says Luke, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove, and a voice of love came from heaven, you are mine, my beloved, with you I am well pleased. All of a sudden, the dislocation and disconnection of the moment, the distance between a harsh earth and an idyllic heaven, was revealed to be an illusion, and God tore through the distance to claim and love a human being.

It happened in rather dramatic fashion for Jesus and the Jews, a discernible voice from the heavens. For the rest of us, removed from these events by time and place, the discernible voice from the heavens is a little harder to come by. But we proclaim the voice from the heavens is calling to each of us nonetheless in the holy sacrament of baptism. We proclaim that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is a revelation to everyone everywhere about the way God is with us, tearing open the heavens to tell us we are loved. Created, formed, redeemed, and called, are we all. In our baptisms, we make an outward and visible sign of the inward grace at work for all, always cleansing and nourishing us to make us whole, the grace we discover in Jesus Christ.

As we contemplate baptism this week, there are particular details in Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus that are worth paying attention to. "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus was also baptized..." says the text, only in the context of the whole community did the spirit descend. What an important reminder, that baptism is about God, sure, but it is also about community. We are baptized into one another, brought together by ritual and covenant, to be like and with Christ together.

I learned a lesson about the seal of baptism from the church that baptized me. Although I was baptized as an infant, I spent some disillusioned years away from church, returning again as an adult. When Amanda and I moved back to Atlanta ten years ago, we joined the church I was baptized in, Central Presbyterian. While there, I began sensing a call to the ministry. Part of this exhaustive process involves declaring your desire to inquire about ministry in front of the session of the church. Wanting to prove myself worthy of such an inquiry, I put hours of thought into a five paragraph theme of articulate brilliance, justifying myself as worthy of listening for God's call upon my life. It was very convincing, if I do say so myself. I delivered this speech passionately, with everything I had, hoping it was enough. And when the session floor was thereafter opened up for discussion, only one person spoke up, Linda, and she said, "well, we promised when we baptized you to nurture you in your faith journey, so of course, we support your inquiry!" Wow, had I wasted a lot of hours worrying about justifying myself to a community that promised me before I could even speak that it would walk with me. That was a day I learned about baptism, and how hard it can be sometimes to figure that we are loved and claimed, perhaps impossible without a community of faith.

Baptism is a sign of the grace at work for all, but it is also a seal of what is at work for all upon our lives through the church.

Another sneaky detail in Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, in addition to the communal setting, is that Jesus was baptized, and then praying, when the heavens opened and the spirit descended and the voice of God sounded. Baptism and prayer invoked the Holy Spirit in some way for Jesus. In the same way, it is through prayer that the heavens are opened up for us, and sometimes through prayer the Holy Spirit can descend for us with a moment of assurance or clarity or challenge from some place beyond, and we have to work hard to attune our minds and ears to the whispers of God.

In prayer, we reach beyond what Simone Weil talks about as a "world of unreality and dreams." We give up, if but for a moment, "imagining ourselves as the center of the universe" and "awaken to all that is real and eternal." This moment of humility, in prayer, is a window to the true light. "It is a transformation, analogous to that which takes place in the dusk of the evening, where we suddenly discern as a tree what we

had first seen as a stooping man; or where we suddenly recognize as a rustling of leaves what we thought at first was whispering voices.”<sup>1</sup> By drawing toward God, we start to see ourselves and others not the way all might first seem to us – dislocated and disconnected – but the way things really are – related, connected, loved, and called to a new way.

I once heard of a grandfather recount a conversation he had had with his six year old grandson, just before bedtime. “Tell me a story,” the boy said. “What kind of story would you like to hear?” “One with me in it.” This is baptism. A story about Jesus and the Israelites with me in it, a story about the way things really are for you and me and everyone. Created, formed, redeemed and called, the heavens torn open for us, with a word of ultimate love.

---

<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*.