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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, January 13, 2019**  
**Baptism of Our Lord/Lectionary 1/Proper X/Year C**  
**Primary Text: Isaiah 43:1-7**  
**Secondary Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**  
**Sermon Title: “Do Not Fear, For I Have Redeemed You”**

## Theme

*Near the end of Israel’s exile in Babylon, God promises to bring them home. They need no longer be afraid, because the one who formed, created, and called them by name now redeems them from all their enemies. God declares them precious and honored, and God loves them.*

## Text

<sup>1</sup>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.  
<sup>2</sup>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.  
<sup>3</sup>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.  
<sup>4</sup>Because 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.  
<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you;  
    I will bring your offspring from the east,  
    and from the west I will gather you;  
<sup>6</sup>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—  
<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
    whom I created for my glory,  
    whom I formed and made.”

## Sermon

The title of this sermon comes from the First Reading from Isaiah. And while I almost always find plenty in the Gospel Reading to preach on, I am drawn to the First Reading from Isaiah this weekend.

But before I just take you into the writing of Isaiah, I feel I have to tell you this; the writing of Isaiah spans a period longer than the average human being lived in those days. The entire corpus of Isaiah's writing is sixty-six chapters and covers over two-hundred years of Israel's history. How is that possible you ask? Well, scholars believe that what we know of as Isaiah is really a complex collection of the writings of several prophets and editors, and those same scholars traditionally break the book down into:

- **First Isaiah – Chapters 1-39 (742-700 BCE) Probably written by Isaiah**
- **Second Isaiah – Chapters 40-55 (587-538 BCE)**
- **Third Isaiah – Chapters 56-66 (after 538 BCE)**

The reason I had to tell you that is because just last Christmas Eve we heard from Isaiah 9

<sup>2</sup>The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;

<sup>6</sup>For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;

And I believe I said that though Isaiah prophesied the coming of a Messiah, it would be another seven-hundred years of waiting before he arrived on the scene. And arguably, though Jesus Christ, God's long awaited Messiah, was probably born around 4 BCE, he really didn't appear on the scene until after his baptism around 27 CE that inaugurates his ministry, which we celebrate today.

And the reason I feel I have to tell you all those details is because now I am going to tell you that the context of the First Reading comes from a time that precedes the return of the Israelites exiled to Babylon which began in 538 BCE. And you being astute students of the Bible, I didn't want any of you coming up to me after worship asking, how could all that have happened in one prophet's lifetime, and because I

am not only your preacher, I am also your teacher, and I want you to learn, because when you learn, you will deepen in love and devotion to your God. Okay, necessary business done. Let's move along.

During the entire corpus of Isaiah, God did not change, but God's attitude and mercy toward his chosen people Israel grows. Every one of you can relate to this. A child does something wrong and breaks a family rule and gets caught. The parent, out of love, punishes the child, hoping the punishment corrects the bad behavior. Behavior is corrected and life in the loving relationship is restored.

This is exactly what happens during the corpus of Isaiah. And at the time of the First Reading, the punishment is about to end, and Isaiah, on behalf of the LORD gave them that message that you heard read a moment ago.

The Israelites have suffered mightily over the last two-hundred years, but at the point of this reading, it is all about to end. The LORD is about to do a mighty work that will, at least in part, restore Israel. And in an effort to reassure them of the LORD's love and sovereignty over them, the LORD said the words of reassurance that I used for the sermon title:

*“Do Not Fear, For I Have Redeemed You”*

I think that this brief passage of a much larger and important message from the LORD to all his creation is timeless and perhaps called for as a reminder to us today.

Though we may be facing uncertainty in many areas of our lives both personally and communally, God has not been off duty. Again God says,

*<sup>1b</sup>“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*<sup>4</sup>“you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,*

I don't know about you, but I as your spiritual leader find great comfort in words such as these when

- the results of the stewardship campaign do not rise to the challenge of our looming budget,
- or when our congress can't agree and our president can't govern,
- or when our community suffers the loss of a major employer
- or when a beloved member of this fellowship gets a terrible diagnosis

We don't get to question God about this. This is when we use the greatest gift God in Christ gave us and that is the gift of faith. We simply must believe that God has our situations under control and we must believe it in faith.

Over the holidays, I found myself in a conversation about faith issues when a member of the family said something about being concerned if he had done enough, if he was good enough, to merit Heaven. There is more to that story that I will not tell you, but my first thought was, "Doesn't anyone listen to me?" So please listen to me now.

NO! None of us has done enough, been good enough, to merit Heaven! Martin Luther, the Pope, Mother Theresa – no one has done enough. No one *can ever* do enough.

Breaking News! God has been aware of this conundrum since Adam and Eve bit the apple! And God was not content to just wring his hands and say, "I gave them everything they needed for a perfect godly life and they chose poorly."

On the contrary, God loves his creation, always has, always will, it is contrary to the nature of God to do otherwise. And so hundreds of years before Jesus Christ, God's Messiah and final solution to this problem was born in Bethlehem, God gave his own words to Isaiah that ought to inform us about how God feels about the problem of sin and the separation from God that it causes, and the beginning of God's plan to fix the problem. God said,

<sup>1b</sup>"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>4</sup>"you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,

One time I went to court to accompany a member who wanted me with him during his court appearance and before he got his moment in front of the judge, I watched the judge do his thing. One man tried to interrupt the judge to explain something and the judge fired back, "You don't get to talk in my court unless I ask you to. Do you understand me?"

This may not be a good example of polite professional behavior, but I use it as an illustration of how I think God must feel sometimes. Though God's gift of grace revealed on the cross of Christ is impossible for us to understand, that is where faith and belief comes into play for us. We don't get to question God about this. We simply believe it in faith.

<sup>1b</sup>"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>4</sup>"you are precious in my sight,  
and honored, and I love you,

It's a dangerous thing to try to put words in God's mouth, but if I could, I hear him saying, "You are my creation, my children. I am the Father of all that is. You belong here. We belong together."

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

My Raisin' the Bar Challenge for you this week is to stop the doubting of God's undeserved and unimaginable love, grace, and mercy for you. And replace that wasted time, by meditating on it, and grow in your appreciation of it, and I think you will grow in love, devotion, and worship of God in return.

### **Prayer**

God of Isaiah and all creation, do not be surprised when we doubt and forgive us when we do, but your love, grace, and mercy is beyond our ability to believe. But draw us in, and let us wallow in your embrace, and grow our faith in you. We pray this in the name of the one who came to save us, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, and our Lord. Amen