

Grace Lutheran Community, 9<sup>th</sup> January, 2022  
First Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of Jesus, Year C

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But now, this is what the LORD says – He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine.’ Isaiah 43:1

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They say you shouldn’t live in the past, and that’s probably true. But learning from the past – that’s a different story. In fact, taking time to reflect on the year gone by – whether it’s a calendar year or another year of marriage – is a great way to learn more about yourself, and to reflect on your relationships with those around you. So, some questions to consider.

First, what were your biggest challenges/struggles in 2021? When we’re in the midst of a challenging time, it’s hard to overlook its existence. But once we’ve made it through, those struggles seem to get smaller and smaller in our rear-view mirror. On one hand, not dwelling on them is part of being resilient. On the other, it’s important to give ourselves credit for overcoming and accomplishing hard things. There’s also the reality that you might still be struggling – acknowledge that. Not all obstacles have an end date and get tied up in a neat bow, but you can still reflect on what you’ve learned so far and the progress you’ve made.

Second, in what areas did you think you thrived in 2021? What do you consider your successes? Interestingly, some of our biggest success may have been overcoming the challenges you talked about in the previous question. It’s worth celebrating! Looking back, we can see the role that our struggles play in helping us grow, and this can give us a new perspective as we take on tough endeavours in the future.

Third, what were your favourite memories for 2021? Taking time to reminisce about the best moments and memories from the year helps puts things into perspective and gives us an opportunity to feel gratitude. Were there some tough times? Sure. But were there also some really great times?

Fourth, what did you appreciate about those around you in the past year? We all have our own ways of showing appreciation, but sometimes, there’s no substitute for hearing it.

Finally, what do you want to leave behind as you start a New Year? And what do you want to bring with you? This is an opportunity to put intention behind a fresh start. Maybe you want to leave behind bad habits or attitudes, guilt, resentment, or the pain of a difficult experience. Perhaps you want to bring with you gratitude, a slower pace, and making time for others. Consider talking about steps you’ll need to take, and how you may help others.

They say that hindsight is 20/20, and while we may not always see things as they were with 100% accuracy, there’s definitely something to be gained from reflecting on the past. Without it, we have no gauge for our how we’ve grown, what we’ve learned, or what we did right. And without it, we may not truly see how God has been at work in our lives. In what way was God ‘there for you’ in 2021? In what way will you seek to realise His presence as you live through 2022?

As we come to a very familiar passage from the Bible, we are reminded that God is 'there for us'. Isaiah says, "But now, this is what the LORD says – He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine'."

When we come to this Bible Reading there are many different words we could focus upon. We could look at words such as 'called' or 'created' or 'redeemed'. We could look at phrases such as "precious and honoured in My sight", or "Do not be afraid." But there is a very important word throughout this reading, and that is the word 'you'.

I'm not sure if you have ever thought about the importance of this word 'you', but let's look again at our reading without this word (and words associated with it in our reading)...But now, this is what the Lord says—He who created... Jacob, He who formed... Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed...; I have summoned... by name; .... When... pass through the waters, I will be...; and when...pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over.... When...walk through the fire, ...not be burned; the flames will not set...ablaze. Since...precious and honoured in My sight, and because I love..., I will give people in exchange..., nations in exchange for...life. Do not be afraid, for I am...; I will bring...children from the east, and gather...from the west.

The reading itself still sort of makes sense. But it's when we add the 19 instances of 'you' of this reading that it has a whole new dimension for us... 'You' are created... 'you' are redeemed... you' are called by name... you' are precious... you' are honoured... you' are protected, and brought back home... WOW!! What a word...!! This is all for 'you'... However, as we look at this text, it is important to consider who the 'you' really is that the Lord is speaking of through the prophet Isaiah.

When we look at this passage, immediately we see that the 'you' is: 'Jacob' and 'Israel'. ("This is what the Lord says—He who created you, *Jacob*, He who formed you, *Israel*"). These words 'Jacob' and 'Israel' originally referred to the Jewish people. 'Jacob' was the father of twelve sons, who became the twelve tribes of Israel. The prophet Isaiah had lived when the Northern Kingdom (known as 'Israel') was destroyed by the Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom remained (the 'Southern Kingdom' was known as 'Judah', consisting of all the territory of Judah, and a significant portion of Benjamin). And what Isaiah could see (as revealed by God) was that just as the Northern Kingdom faced destruction, so too the Southern Kingdom would face hard times because they too were 'walking away' from God.

Just before our Reading today (Isaiah 43), Isaiah says (Isaiah 42:24-25): "Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow His ways; they did not obey His law. So He poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart." And the 'you', therefore, are the people of Judah, who would go into exile into Babylon, but who would be 'called back' by God.

But there is another dimension to this 'you', and on the day we remember the baptism of Jesus, this word also speaks of Jesus. As John the Baptist was

speaking of the One who would come after him, he spoke of how He would 'baptise with the Spirit and with fire'. Jesus entered baptism to identify with sinful humanity. Jesus, the only Son, and holy Son of God, was also 'baptised into death' (going through the fire of pain and agony and death – end even hell itself – to win us the victory. Who has God called by name? He has called 'Jesus'.

And because Jesus has gone through death, and we are baptised in His name, this word of the prophet Isaiah also speaks to 'YOU'. 'You' are the ones who are 'called by name'. 'You are the ones who have God's protection. 'You' are the ones who are 'gathered into God's kingdom' when 'you' are 'called by name' (such as in 'your' baptism). But one of the problems we often face when we hear such words from the prophet Isaiah is that we often turn the 'you' into 'me'. And, in doing so, we gain an unhealthy sense of 'self'.

As a church we speak about how 'you are special', and 'unique', and 'important' (cf. Ps.139). All this is true. But often what we do is quickly turn the 'you' into 'me'. And, in doing so, we may think of ourselves 'more highly than we ought' (cf. Rom. 12:3). We may think of how God serves us (which is true), but then we either do not stop to reflect on our sinful human nature that saw Christ go through the fire of His suffering and death (because of 'your' sin); or, we think of how God 'serves us' but we do not stop and reflect on how He also calls us to serve others (cf. Mark 10:35-45).

One of the fascinating things in this reading from Isaiah is that the word 'you' actually does not stand alone in this reading. There is no simple 'you', as the Hebrew (as many other languages) has the 'pronoun' either a prefix or a suffix to the verb or the noun to identify where the 'action', or 'object', is directed. For example, the Hebrew has as one word 'one-forming-you' and 'one-creating-you' and 'I-redeemed-you'. The emphasis is on the action, and the performing the action (in this case, God), and not the object. And this is Good News for us.

To understand the 'you' spoken of by the prophet it is important not to turn the 'you' into 'me', but try to keep it at as a 'you'. Certainly the Bible is written for 'you'. Certainly Christ died for 'your' sins'. Certainly He was raised for 'your' justification. Certainly the Holy Spirit has come to 'you' to lead 'you' to faith in Jesus. But this 'you' is never in isolation. It is a 'plural', a part of 'community'. "'You' are not 'your' own, for 'you' were bought with a price. So glorify God in 'your body'," Paul says (1 Cor.6:19-20). For, "'you' are the body of Christ, and each one of 'you' is a part of it," (1 Cor.12:27). "But now, this is what the Lord says—He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine." (Isaiah 43:1).

What a fantastic message! One that is upbeat and full of hope. A message that clarifies who God is, who Israel is, and, most importantly, whose Israel is. Did you happen to notice that The Chief Actor, The Great Initiator in this message is God, not humans? God comes to Israel in one of their most depressed, vulnerable moments. God comes when they feel down and out and at their lowest. God comes to pick them up again. God assures them that they have not been forgotten; they are indeed very special to God; they belong to God; they are loved by God and shall be restored and delivered out of their exile by God. What a wonderful message!

In another time and place someone told the following story: A fellow bought an old organ which had been magnificent in its day, but now it was dilapidated, banged up and hardly played at all any more. So he called in experts from all over the world, hoping they could restore it. When they had finished the organ looked like new. The little angels were shiny and clean; the ornamental carved leaves had smooth curves and corners. The botchy varnish was gone. The only problem was that the insides were sitting in boxes on the floor. The owner continued to advertise for organ experts to fix and restore his organ. But no one could do it. One day a half-blind old man knocked on the door. The Butler laughed at him saying, "What makes you think you can fix it? We've had experts here from all over the world." But the owner overheard the discussion and answered saying that it couldn't hurt to try. So the stranger set out to work. After several days, he had the organ operating like new. When asked how he could do this, he replied, "I made it."

"I made it... I made you... I have redeemed you... I have called you by name... I love you... you are mine..." That's what God says and does for us. That's our true source of hope and deliverance now and in the future. As the maker of the organ could best fix and restore and give new life to the organ because he made it; so, too, God who made each one of us is The Only One who can truly fix, restore and give new life to each one of us. It doesn't matter how down-in-the-dumps we may feel; God can and does and will lift us up and deliver us from all of our forms of exile.

That's the message of Christ's baptism and our baptism. We have been baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our baptismal covenant is what gives us the assurance of God's true identity and our true identity. We are precious; we belong to God; we are one with Christ and therefore our calling and purpose; our whole life is bound to be lived out in the service of Christ and His Church.

God has called 'you' by name and has redeemed 'you'. It is in this sure hope that we step out into this new calendar year. As you rejoice that God's love is for the 'other people' (the people who are the 'you' who surround 'your' life), it is then that our hearts truly begin to explode with the joy, love, hope and peace that comes from God in Jesus. Amen.