

Isaiah 43:1-7

The Baptism of Our Lord C (Observed) • Epiphany 1 • January 13, 2010

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church • Boise, Idaho

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The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 43: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine." This is the Word of the Lord.

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

I. In Babylon

"Fear not," said the Lord to His people, but note when He said it. They were captives in Babylon, carried away from their own land because of their sin. They'd been far from faithful: they'd become rebellious runaways who wanted nothing to do with the Lord, who snatched everything He gave to them and used it for their own desires. They'd put their trust in other gods for protection, and the Lord had let them have their wish: He left it to those gods protect them. But when the Babylonians showed up on Jerusalem's doorstep, those false gods proved their helplessness and the city fell. The two verses just before our text describe it well: "Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So He poured on him the heat of His anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart" (Isaiah 42:24-25). The Lord did not want to discipline His people anymore than loving parents relish disciplining their children; but because they rejected Him and His protection, they were captives once again.

But the Lord was not all about anger. Despite their rebelliousness, God was still faithful. He'd created them, formed them as His people—and He had promised that the Savior of the nations would be born among them. So even now, as they wept in Babylon, the Lord called out, "Fear not." "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are Mine." He then went on to declare that He was working things to set them free. Babylon had fallen to Persia, so the people now had Cyrus as their ruler, their captor-king. The Lord was arranging things so that Cyrus would set them free; and in return for their release, the Lord would give to the Persian Empire the lands of Egypt, Cush and Seba—other rebellious peoples in need of correction from their trust in false gods. Thus He declared: "I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in My eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life."

This did not mean immediate deliverance: those captives would still pass through fire and water, an Old Testament way of saying that there would still be plenty of trouble (Psalm 66:12). But in His faithfulness and mercy, the Lord would not forget a one of those who trusted in Him. He promised, "Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring My sons from afar and My daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by My name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made."

That was the hope the Lord offered to His people. He'd formed them, called them by name. Rather than dump them for other peoples and bigger kingdoms, He'd gladly trade Egypt, Cush and Seba for their freedom. "Fear not," He said, "for I am with you."

"You are Mine."

II. Called By His Name

The Lord has created you and formed you, too. And He cries out to you, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine.”

This is comfort for you, for you are in a captivity of sorts. Along with all the rebels of Jerusalem who were carried off to captivity, there were also penitent believers who were swept away, too. Your life is like that: it is likely more pleasant than captivity in a foreign nation, but this world is not your home anymore. You are children of God and heirs of heaven—you’ve become a stranger to a world that rejects the Lord, His Law and His Gospel, and you’ll only feel more estranged as the world departs from His Word more and more. There will still be good times here, because the Lord has not abandoned you. But there will also be plenty of trouble; and there will also be fear.

So the Lord says to you, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine.” This is not just sentiment: you can probably point exactly to the date that this happened, when He said this to you. For me, it was April 30, 1967 that God called me by name, out loud. Through the mouth of Pastor Kudick, the Lord said, “Timothy John Pauls, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.” He has done the same for you: He has called you by name so that you can be sure you are His, that He has redeemed you. And as He called you by name, He put His name on you—a mark of possession, His way of saying, “I have redeemed you. You are Mine.”

So the Lord also promises to you: “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.” Again, passing through water and fire is an Old Testament expression for all sorts of trouble; and you have the Lord’s promise of deliverance. But may this verse remind you of something else, too: you have passed through the water and fire already. You were passed through the waters of Holy Baptism, that your old sinful flesh might be drowned. But you were not overwhelmed and swept away: the Lord raised you up so that you are a new creation, formed and redeemed by Him.

In that Baptism, you passed through fire in a way, too. We talked about this on Sunday as we spoke of the Gospel lesson, the Baptism of Our Lord. Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River with all those sinners, taking His place with them. At His baptism, He took their sins upon Himself and began His journey to the cross. Later along the way, He declared in Luke 12:50, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is My distress until it is accomplished!” He was speaking of the cross, His baptism by fire as He endured God’s wrath and hell for the sins of the world. Now, in our epistle from Romans 6, you hear this Good News: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-4). In Baptism, God did far more than add you to a “friends” list. He united you with Jesus’ death, His cross, His baptism of fire. Because He shared His death with you for your sin, you don’t have to die for your sin yourself. You already have, because the Lord united you to His cross when you were baptized. So, in a way, you walked through fire there, but you were not consumed (like sin is consumed and destroyed when it meets the holiness of God); instead, God raised you up as His holy child.

Thus the Lord has called you by name. He’s put His name on you. He has redeemed you. This was not without cost: He has paid a ransom for you. But the ransom was not Egypt, Cush and Seba; that payment would be insufficient, and furthermore He sought to redeem Egypt, Cush and Seba, too. So He

has redeemed you with His own holy precious blood, and His bitter suffering and death. That is what He has given in exchange for your life.

Because such a price has been paid to redeem you, you can be confident that you are precious in His eyes. You are honored by God as His holy child; and He says to you, "I love you."

Hold onto these promises, and fear not.

"Fear not." One of the greatest temptations is fear. Fear that you're not going to make it. Fear that that you're going to be enslaved in sin and separated from God once again. Fear that the troubles you face are going to destroy you. Fear of where the world is going. Fear that you've made some terrible decisions or that you're making the wrong ones now. Fear that you can't do what needs to be done. Fear for yourself and fear for others, too. Few things paralyze like fear. The devil likes fear because the devil likes paralysis: it keeps you from loving God and loving others. It prevents you from doing those things which God has called you to do—especially those things like hearing His Word, coming to His Supper and commending all things to Him in prayer.

So the Lord says to you, "Fear not." But do not take that as a harsh command for you to suck it up and keep going: the Lord is not saying that you must overcome your fears to be His child. You already are His child, remember? He's called you by name and said, "You are Mine." Therefore, one thing you need never fear is whether or not God loves you. He does. For Jesus' sake, you can be sure that He does.

And if God loves you, there is nothing to fear. Where you fear trouble, you know that the Lord is greater and grants you His peace—which does not mean the absence of trouble, but God's presence with you in the midst of trouble. He will use all things for your good—He has promised. Where you fear your own sinfulness, quickly and honestly confess that sinfulness and weakness—for God's grace is sufficient for you, and His power is made perfect in weakness. Where you fear that you're not up to the challenges put before you, you have the assurance that the Lord is using you as His instrument to accomplish what He wills. That may mean using your failures for His glory, so that you and others might trust in Him all the more. But the Lord is faithful. Do not fear. It might be fear of death, for that is an enemy far greater than you or me. But it is a conquered enemy that cannot hold us in the grave—because Christ broke back out of the tomb, and in your baptism He has joined you to His death and His resurrection. Where you fear for others, you have the comfort of God's faithfulness: to all of His baptized children, even those who have rebelled and run away from Him, He still pursues and promises that He loves them, that He would have them return and be His beloved children again.

If God loves you and has redeemed you in Christ, you have nothing to fear. Neither do I. But we are often still afraid. So what shall we do? Confess the fear. Give thanks to God that He has made us His own. Cling to His promises that He will deliver. Then go and do what is given us to do. Our fears are among the many things that cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, because God's Word overcomes our fears. When He says, "Fear not," He is speaking His grace and mercy to you: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are Mine."

Fear not, for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen