

C Baptism of the Lord

2013 January 13

Isaiah 43.1-7

Luke 3.15-22

“You Are Mine”

Toddlers are an interesting category of human beings. They are all energy and yet can fall asleep in only a few seconds. They are beginning to assert their own sense of independence, in often very incoherent ways. They are wonderfully lovable and deeply exasperating, all at the same time. Toddlers have their own rules of possession, as demonstrated by the following list which some very wise observer of these little people has compiled. So here it is: the Toddler's Rules of Possession.

1. If I like it, it's mine.
2. If it's in my hand, it's mine.
3. If I can take it from you, it's mine.
4. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.
5. If I'm building something, all the pieces are mine.
6. If it looks just like mine, it is mine.
7. If I saw it first, it's mine.
8. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it becomes mine.
9. If it's broken, it's yours.

In today's reading from Isaiah, the LORD says to the people of Israel, “I have called you by name. You are mine.” Fortunately the LORD's understanding of possession is significantly more rich and deep and wonderful than any toddler's, or any one of us, for that matter. When the LORD says, “You are mine,” well, that means more than just possession. A whole lot more.

As for all passages of scripture, it is critically important that we set this one from Isaiah in its context. It is written to the people of Israel in their exile in Babylon. Note that the writer of this part of Isaiah refers to the people as both Israel and Jacob, as is common in the Hebrew Scriptures.

You probably have heard or read the story of Israel's captivity many times. Remember that after the death of King Solomon Israel split into two rather uneasy neighbors, the northern nation of Israel and the southern nation of Judah. Although they were both composed of the children of Abraham and shared a long and difficult history, they became two separate nations with two different kings, and often were at war with each other. Over the centuries, from about 900 BC to about 600 BC, they fought with each other and with their neighbors.

Sometimes very powerful neighbors would arise, like the nation of Assyria, which came to dominate the Middle East around the middle of the eighth century BC. Indeed, Assyria became so powerful that it overran, conquered, and carried into exile many of the people of the northern nation, Israel. We know from many sources that that cataclysm happened in 722 BC.

The southern nation of Judah was spared, although it looked for some time like it also would fall to the Assyrians. In time the Assyrian Empire was gradually supplanted by a new power, the Babylonian Empire. Thus the tiny nation of Judah became threatened by this new regional power. In a series of defeats Judah lost its sovereignty and independence, and finally, in the year 586 BC, the capital city Jerusalem was overrun and destroyed, and the last of the elite

classes of Judah were carried off into exile in Babylon. Thus all of the educated people, the priests, the scholars, the military leaders, were hauled away.

It is frankly impossible for us to imagine the despair, heartbreak, and hopelessness that these exiles experienced. You might try to think what it would be like if today some foreign power were able to overwhelm and defeat the vast armed forces of the United States, in the process causing millions of deaths, and then being taken in chains, with your family, to some land hundreds of miles away, perhaps across one of our neighboring oceans.

The depth of the humiliation and despair of the captives is captured, perhaps as well as it can be in words, by Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

Isaiah chapter 43, and indeed probably all of the chapters from 40 to 55, were written to this exiled community in Babylon. When those chapters were composed, a new power was looming on the horizon, the Empire of Persia, and it was already clear that the Babylonians would not be able to hold them off. Just as Assyria had fallen, so also Babylon would fall. And furthermore, the writers of these intermediate chapters in Isaiah knew, perhaps from a divine revelation, perhaps from diplomatic sources, that as soon as Babylon fell, the Israelite exiles would be set free to go home. Home, to Jerusalem, the city they could never forget, for which they longed so deeply.

So what does the writer pen in his message to the exiles?

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.
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.

For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Do not fear, 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 them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
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.'

Now here is what I ask you to do. In place of Jacob and Israel, substitute "people of Good Shepherd Presbyterian."

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, people of Good Shepherd,
he who formed you, saints of Good Shepherd:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
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.
For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

You see, these words were written to you, too, not just to those ancient exiles. These words were written to you.

Today is the day in the church calendar known as Baptism of the Lord. It is always the Sunday following the Day of Epiphany, which is always the twelfth day after Christmas. On this day, Baptism of the Lord, we recall the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by John, the story we heard in Luke's account just a moment ago.

Now, "when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and 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.'"

What is it exactly that happens when we are baptized? Actually there are many levels and threads of meaning in this simple sacrament that we celebrate periodically, with infants and children and youths and adults. But one of those meanings is that we become adopted by the LORD. So when one is immersed under the water, or when the water is poured or sprinkled on her head, she becomes an adopted child of God. That's why names are so important in baptisms. Pastors are always careful to use the full name of the person being baptized, to indicate that this particular, unique, wonderful person is becoming a member of the family of God, is becoming a child of God.

Amazingly enough, that's what seems to be happening when Jesus is baptized, even though we know that there is no separation between Jesus and his Father and between the Holy Spirit, all three of whom appear in this reading from Luke. In spite of their being one God, the Father is nevertheless "well pleased" with the Son, and the Father says so.

So it is every time someone is baptized. That person becomes, in a new and amazing way, a son or daughter of God, with whom God is well pleased. Today we welcomed new members into this your church. Throughout the words said in receiving these new members were references to baptism, a reminder to these new folks and to all of us, that we have been baptized, and that therefore, regardless of which particular church we may be a part of, we are all members of the "holy, catholic church," that is, the holy, world-wide church of Jesus the Messiah. These new folks have been previously baptized. You and they were beloved members of the same church long before they showed up on the doorstep of this building.

That's the connection with this amazing passage from Isaiah. In baptism the LORD says to us, I created you, members of Good Shepherd. I formed you. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you, all of you, by name, and you, all of you, are mine. When you pass through deep and turbulent waters, I will be with you, and through rapid rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, and the flame will not consume you, you dearly loved saints of Good Shepherd Presbyterian. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

Note that all of this passage is written to a people, not to a single individual. So when the writer pens, "You are precious in my sight, and honored and I love you," he means all of you. These words are written to a community, not to an individual. The community of Good Shepherd Presbyterian, the community of all followers of Jesus, wherever they may be, and whenever they may have lived. "You are precious in my sight, honored, and I love you," says the LORD.

Those exiles in Babylon 2500 years ago could also be certain that the God who had kept and guarded them for hundreds of years would rescue and redeem them, in spite of the sin that had caused them to be captured in the first place. They had received the due penalty for that sin, but the Holy One of Israel had never turned his back on them, rejected them, or forgotten them. And they would soon be returning home. Home, to Jerusalem.

In our baptisms and when we celebrate the baptisms of others, we remember and celebrate these things. These celebrations, and these words from Isaiah, remind us that even when our churches, even when Good Shepherd church, passes through deep and turbulent waters, and through fire, we have a Savior and a redeemer, who is the LORD, who is Jesus the Messiah.

Do not fear, the LORD says to you, Good Shepherd-ites. For I have redeemed you, and I am with you. I have called you by name, and you are mine. You are precious in my sight, honored, and I love you.