

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

PRECIOUS IN GOD'S SIGHT

In Alex Haley's book, *Roots*, there is a memorable scene the night the slave, Kunta Kinte, drove his master to a ball at a big plantation house. Kunta Kinte heard the music from inside the house, music from the white folks' dance. He parked the buggy and settled down to wait out the long night of his master's revelry. While he sat in the buggy, he heard other music coming from the slaves' quarters, the little cabins behind the big house. It was different music, music with a different rhythm. He felt his legs carry him down the path toward those cabins. There he found a man playing African music, the music which he remembered hearing in Africa as a child - the music he had almost forgotten. Kunta Kinte found that the man was from his section of Africa. They talked excitedly, in their native tongue, of home and the things of home.

That night, after returning from the dance Kunta Kinte went home changed. He lay upon the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept, weeping in sadness that he had almost forgotten, weeping in joy that he had at last remembered. The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But the music helped him to remember. (Pulpit Resource, January 1995, p. 9)

That story reminds us of how easy it is, in the midst of daily life, to forget who we are and Whose we are. We become so sidetracked meeting the demands of each day, squeezing in one more thing to do, rushing to get from here to there, that, in our frantic scramble to keep up or get ahead, we lose sight of who we are. It's not that we forget our names or who our family members are or our Social Security numbers. But, because of the fast-paced lives we live, we are tempted to forget that we belong to God and we are precious in God's sight. We are the beloved children of God and we have infinite worth.

Fortunately for us, the Lord our God has gone to great lengths to remind us of our status as God's precious and beloved children. As we read Scripture, we are drawn into the biblical narrative and, what's true for Israel or the church is true for us as well. God speaks to us through the sacred text, and their story resonates with our own story.

In the Old Testament lesson for today, the prophet Isaiah speaks a word of hope to the Israelites, who had been captured and dragged off into exile by the Babylonians. The years had passed and surely the Israelites must have wondered if God had forgotten them or abandoned them. Finally, words of hope and affirmation burst forth like rays of sunshine through dense cloud cover. The period of Israel's punishment is ended and God says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

It's interesting to note that Isaiah, speaking on God's behalf, doesn't say "if" but "when" - "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; and the flame shall not consume you." The reason for Israel's safe passage home is this: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." When Israel had lost her way and wandered far from her true identity, these words of Isaiah, this affirmation by God, would help Israel to remember and rediscover her rich heritage as the chosen people of God.

Likewise, in Luke's Gospel, John the Baptist pointed beyond himself to the One, who was coming, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (which

implies both judgment and God's gift of the Spirit given to the disciples at Pentecost). Sometime later, Jesus appeared at the Jordan River and was baptized by John. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove, and God's voice boomed across the waters and proclaimed to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Are we able to hear in the words spoken to Israel, the Word of God spoken directly to us as well? Can we possibly believe the truth that God also calls us by name and tells us, without a doubt: "You are mine... you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Someone has said that the Bible is a love letter written by God and addressed to humankind. Certainly this is the case in the passage from Isaiah for today. God doesn't mince words. God declares to you and me: "You are mine, you are precious, and I love you." At a time when people are tempted to think too much of themselves or too little of themselves, the word from Isaiah sets the record straight; more than anything or anyone else, we are loved by God and deemed precious in God's sight. That affirmation of faith serves to humble us and elevate our status all at the same time.

Furthermore, on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, in Jesus' baptism, we remember our own baptisms. We remember, in case we have forgotten, that we are also identified as God's beloved children. Like Jesus, we too receive the gift of the Holy Spirit to reassure us of Whose we are and to empower us to live as the precious children of God. God has placed the divine stamp of approval upon us and proudly claims us as God's very own. In our baptisms, God says out loud so that we (and all others) can hear: "You are my son, my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

It's important to note that God's claim upon us is only half of the message. The Book of Order, which is part of the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), says it best when it states very succinctly that "The election of the people of God (is) for service as well as for salvation" (G-2.0500a1). In other words, we are not only summoned by God to be the beloved and precious children of the Holy One, we are also sent by God to reach out to the world, for all people are equally precious in God's sight.

At the end of the Isaiah 43 passage, God says to the Israelites, "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made." Israel and we ourselves are created for God's glory. Someone has interpreted this notion of giving glory to God as "enhancing God's reputation in the world." We are called to witness to others about God's steadfast love and faithfulness. Israel was called to be "a light to the nations." However, Israel tended to focus solely on the privilege of her favored status while she forgot all about the responsibility that went along with being chosen by God.

When Jesus was baptized and he heard the voice of God affirming his very nature as the beloved Son of God, Jesus also understood - especially with the gift of the Holy Spirit - that the time of his public ministry had arrived and he went forth announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand.

Likewise, in our own baptisms - whether we remember that monumental occasion or not - God claimed us as God's very own; God called us precious, beloved children. And, God has summoned us and sent us forth to extend Christ's ministry of love and service to others. God has given us a vocation, a calling, to be ourselves and to do what we do best. God has given us the Spirit, who, in turn, has given us unique gifts with which to serve others. Namely, we are to understand ourselves to be "God's persons in and for the world" (Barbara Brown Taylor).

The distinguished author, Chaim Potok, wanted to be a writer from an early age, but when he went to college, his mother took him aside and said, "Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but I have a better idea. Why don't you be a brain surgeon? You'll keep a lot of people from dying, and you'll make a lot of money." Chaim replied, "No mama, I want to be a writer." He returned from vacation. His mother pulled him off alone and said, "Chaim, I know you want to be a writer, but listen to your mama. Be a brain surgeon, they keep a lot of people from dying, and you will make a lot of money." Chaim replied, "I want to be a writer." Thus the conversation went on throughout his college years until, at the end, his mother in desperation again said, "Chaim, you're wasting your time. Be a brain surgeon. You'll keep a lot of people from dying, you'll make a lot of money." Finally, Chaim Potok exploded, "Mama, I don't want to keep people from dying. I want to show them how to live! I want to be a writer." (Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Explanation in Vocational Holiness*, Eerdmans, 1992, p. 46)

The Lord emphasizes our precious identity, and, at the same time, God expects us to interact with others and show them how to live. We do that best by pointing others, as did John the Baptist, to Jesus. Today, we give thanks that we are precious in God's sight, and we remember that there is more to be said and done! Our calling, which is set forth in our baptism, is to witness and work until every last human being knows that they too are precious in God's sight. When that day finally arrives, then we will truly give glory to God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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