

(Isaiah 43:1-7 NRSV)

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

(Luke 3:21-22 NRSV)

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² 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."

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Alienation's Demise

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:21-22

The time is somewhere in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E. The place is somewhere in Babylon. The situation is that the people Israel has been weeping by the rivers of Babylon for half a century. For half a century she has lived in a foreign dominion, bereft of home and homeland, licking the wounds of her alienation from her God.

In the logic of the prophets, Israel ended up in these tough straits by her own doing. According to the prophets' understanding of religion, if the people were good, God would treat them well; if the people were bad, God would treat them ill. In that economy, the thundering armies of Nebuchadnezzar were but God in wolf's clothing, God come to punish the people because they had become corrupt, God come in the form of a mighty empire to strike down the people for their misdeeds.

So, there mourning on the banks of Babylon's rivers, the people Israel was doubly grieved. She was grieved by her miserable circumstance of exile. And she was grieved even more by her estrangement from her God. Not only had she been marched out of the holy land and imprisoned to these foreign quarters, but she also knew that the physical exile was but a symbol of the deeper spiritual one. The chosen people were un-chosen. God had thrown his or her hands in the air, said, "I've had enough," and abandoned those whom the holy one had accompanied as a cloud by day and a fire by night in the wilderness, those whom God had accompanied before Abram became Abraham, and before Joseph was sold into Egypt. The covenant had started out as a starry promise that the chosen people would thrive and be as uncountable as the heavenly lights. But Israel had broken her end of the bargain, and now she wailed in shame and desolation.

I would want to quarrel with the idea that God is a heavenly bean counter who hands out punishment and reward according to our merit. Far too many obviously un-meritorious folks seem to be doing just fine. And more dispiriting, some lovely people, like the folks killed in Wakefield a couple of weeks ago, seem random victims of deranged violence. I think it's fair to say that there is no precise logic at work in the universe where people necessarily get what they deserve. You remember that even the Biblical character Job chafed at the idea.

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There is no such precise logic at work, or better said, the logic that is at work is not very precise. But the ancients were onto something that I suspect we know and experience to this day. And that is, we bring much of our blessings and curses upon ourselves.

And so, when Israel wept tears of hopelessness on the banks of Babylon's rivers, she was not entirely off the mark in taking responsibility for her circumstance. It was true that corruption, greed, short-sightedness, and injustice had contributed to her demise. And it is true that these behaviors pulled apart her deep bond with the God of her promises. Long before the existentialist philosophers claimed the insight, human beings have known the pangs of alienation, alienation from God, from the ground of being, from the spirit of life, from that which stirs and animates and makes us anything good that we are.

The ancient Israelites brought this alienation upon themselves, and is it not a travail that we in the twenty-first century bring upon ourselves just as certainly? There are things which come out of the blue – an accident, random victimization, disease, to name a few, and they are an agonizing part of human existence. But, at least if one's soul and spirit are intact when these vagaries of life are encountered, one can find a modicum of grace and peace in the trouble. However, when the trouble is the result of an alienated soul and spirit, then the trouble is doubly devastating.

In the 1990 movie *Ghost* Sam Wheat is murdered by order of his corrupt business associate. Sam is a good guy, so he becomes a ghost and is allowed to help his girlfriend, Molly Jensen, not only to find his murderer. But also to stay out of danger. Throughout the film, Sam and Molly are portrayed as characters whose soul and spirit are fully intact. As such they are clear, likeable and rather straightforward people. On the other hand, those responsible for Sam's murder are desperate people, driven by a complex web of greed, fear and anxiety. They are agitated and ungrounded and frantic. In the course of things, the two main thugs are killed. When they die, unlike Sam who became a helpful ghost, the thugs are dragged shady dark spirits as the victims scream in panic and hair-raising dread.

Those alienated in soul and spirit are dragged away by death's chilling shades. But Molly and Sam, even parted by death, are governed by their love and their honesty. Even in something of a romantic comedy, the difference between those who are alienated and those who are whole is apt take your breath away.

I won't be so bold to assume that I know the places or the ways in which any of you are alienated from God or from spirit and soul. I won't even be so bold to assume that you are. I will confess it is an abyss into which I have looked, so I guess that maybe some of you have, too. But even if you are completely whole in body and soul this sermon is still for you. And if you are alienated, separated in any way from that life giving force of the ground of being, if you find yourself in

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despair or distress which is in some part your own creation, then this sermon is especially for you.

Ancient Israel had heard the warnings. Well, that is, they had heard the words, delivered over and over again by the scriptures and the prophets. They had heard but they had not listened. So when they ended up in Babylon, just as they were warned they would, their despair was deep. For they had gotten just what they were told they would get, and now there seemed no escape. They had received their sentence, and there seemed no possibility of parole.

So, these words we read this morning from Isaiah came as something of a surprise.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² 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. ... ⁴ 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. ⁵ Do not fear, for I am with you.

Love is a funny thing. Very often we think of it as an emotion, the chemistry between two people, for example. But Fred Buechner reminds us that Jesus means we are to love our neighbors without necessarily liking them. It means hoping for our neighbor's well being even if we don't like him or her very much.¹ It seems that this is the love that God has for Israel, and I'm hoping for us. God didn't like the people Israel very much. They had been a great disappointment. It may be the case that an aeon is but an instant to God, but even by God's measure, the holy one had spent a lot of time on this stiff-necked people he had chosen.

God didn't like the people Israel very much. But even so, God loved them. And so even as they wept in Babylon, just as they had been warned they would, God still loved them. Buechner goes on to say that it's pretty hard to love someone, to work for their well-being, very long without coming in the end to rather like them, too.² And one gets the idea that this is how God is with Israel. God was often angry with Israel, frustrated by her hard heart and her equally hard heart. God wanted from time to time to wring their stiff necks. But God kept working for the people Israel's well-being, and not very long into the story God developed deep and abiding affection for this people he also loved.

¹*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner, Harper and Row, 1973, p. 54.

²*Ibid*

This love God has for Israel and one imagines has for all the alienated, even those who have made God grimace as they have separated themselves from the source of life, the love God has seeks us out and walks with us and is meant to restore our wholeness even in the very moment we may be trying to destroy it.

Fifty years Israel had mourned in Babylon, and during all those fifty years they were surrounded by the love of God. But until now they had sensed that love not. For fifty years one imagines they had gone through a number of stages in their corporate emotional life. They first had been, it is certain, in denial that they actually brought about their own demise. They railed to God about their innocence. After a time to think about the whole situation, one imagines that they began to realize that they had played their part in it. And their tears were fueled by guilt as well as sorrow. And they experienced themselves as cut-off from God, as unworthy, as a lost community in a lost land. And they saw no hope for themselves.

Even in this half century of anguish, God was with the people Israel. The immense and powerful love of God was with the people Israel, and they knew it not. They knew it not.

Buechner says another thing about love. He says, "Of all powers, love is the most powerful and the most powerless. It is the most powerful because it alone can conquer that final and most impregnable stronghold which is the human heart. It is the most powerless because it can do nothing except by consent."³

For fifty years Israel had been lost in a misery of her own creation. She had wallowed in denial and self-pity. She had later grieved in sorrow and guilt. And all along she had not realized that God stood by her side pouring out love in abundance. In Buechner's terms, she would not, could not give her consent to love's unimaginable powers.

But now, now fifty years into the heartbreak, her hear began to open. Finally the words of hope which Jeremiah had said long ago rang in her ears. And among them now, the prophet Isaiah sang this love song, too.

O Israel, I have called you by name, and you are mine. You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you. Do not fear for I am with you.

And now, finally, Israel hears and experiences this love of God. Israel's heart is opened to the heart of God. It would yet be decades before the people left Babylon, but once their hearts had been opened it truly was just a matter of time. For now, all that had brought her there and all that had kept her alienated from her God was over.

³Buechner, 53-54.

Our prayer even today is for such hearts open to the powerful healing love of God, the love that is the demise of all brokenness and alienation. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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