

Our Deepest Fear

Baptism of our Lord, Year C

Slide: You are Mine

A new student looks out on a sea of strange faces in his new school at Memorial, home of the Old Abes, wondering where he should sit, which group he should join, and how he will be looked at by others. Coming to a new place to live is always hard but the pandemic has made it even harder of course.

A woman looks into the empty bedroom of her daughter who began her first year of college. Now this mother wonders what lies ahead, not just for her daughter, but for herself, how her life will be different and what it will mean for her future.

An older man lies in a hospital bed. Retirement from his successful law practice had not been difficult. But now he has an illness that leaves him with fatigue and with mobility concerns. He wonders what his purpose could be when he was so full of vitality and health only a two years before.

A young woman drives toward her hometown after being in prison for two years for fraud. Even though her time in prison has ended, she wonders if her true penalty has yet to come in how people will look at her and her finding work. Will people ever trust her?

Who am I? Where do I belong? Am I worthy? Am I loved? These questions that begin around puberty never really go away. The way we deal with them just changes, and sometimes we don't deal with them. Whether we ask these questions out in the open or deep down, we often look for the answers in the wrong places: work, family roles, peer groups, through our accomplishments or successes, or through our imposed status for ourselves.

Yet, in the book of Isaiah, the prophet would have us know that it is God who gives us identity, value, and worth. In chapter 43 read this morning, and often read at funerals, the prophet would relay to a bloodied and exiled people known as the Israelites that although they are occupied and exiled to a foreign land,

they are still loved. And, not only loved, given worth and value.

“Do not fear”, says God. “For I have redeemed you; I have called you by name. You are mine.” Do you know that this is probably the only place in the entire scripture where God says “I love you?” Yes, there is plenty of love in the Bible for God is love and God so loved the world, but to outwardly say “I love YOU” the way that we hear people say it today.

There is no other place in scripture where it is so stated and it is the central verse of the entire reading:

“Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,” God says, “I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.” Have you ever known anyone to give up nations for you? It’s the three words much longed for to hear from a Father who up until a point showed love through action.

At the pastor’s Bible study, we preachers were recently talking about this scripture as a favorite passage of the bible. It’s probably my

favorite of the entire Old Testament. And, it’s a scripture that is pure Gospel, it shows us a God who loves and loves to the point of pure sacrifice.

And, at this Bible study, we sort of laughingly wondered how we could nuance this reading of scripture to preach on it, because the point is so obvious, it doesn’t need preaching. God loves you. Do I really need to spend hours preparing for a sermon to say something so simple? This could be the one time I get in the pulpit and say, “God loves you as it says here in the Old Testament”, and then sit down again...the end.

But, here is the thing... it is that simple, but I’m pretty sure we don’t believe it is...because deep down, I know we have many days where we may wonder it. I think we wonder if God does love us and is it really as simple as all that. And, I think we continue to ask the questions “Who am I” and “Do I have worth”? And, why do we ask those questions?

I think we continue to ask them because we, as human beings, don’t often believe we are worthy of love. Not only

that we often continue to count our worth on worldly standards and not on God's standards. We often base God's love for us on how others and the world love us instead of that God does love us. For, God does love us, even if we don't feel it or believe it.

In Luke's Gospel, we find that the baptism of Jesus leads us down the same path of being beloved by God. It's a perfect pairing of scripture with Isaiah 43 because in the waters of baptism, we understand that God marks us and claims us as God's own children.

In the waters of baptism, God seals God's love for us, no matter what we might have done and what might happen to us. In the waters of our baptism, God gives us evidence of what God says to Jesus "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased." In a sense, God drowns the big fear that we have but often don't express, that we are loved, worthy, and valued.

Now, this is easier to say than to experience, hear and believe. A lot of times, when we are grasping for meaning, we feel that it can't be that simple:

Smile, Jesus loves you, as the old bumper stickers says, is too simplistic. The phrase may be rather glib and simplistic, but it still is true. However, it doesn't mean it wasn't difficult to make it simple for God.

For, in order to make this simple reality that God loves us stick, God had to exchange God's own life for you to make it happen. So, there is nothing simple about it. God exchanged God's self on a cross for all of us because God loves us.

So, maybe we just need to keep hearing it over and over and be reminded about our own baptism over and over. Words such as "I love you" coming straight from God are too good – not to be believed, absorbed, and lived out the way God intends.

The famous quote that is mistakenly granted to Nelson Mandela, really is written by Marian Williamson from her book, A Return to Love, speaks to me right now as I hear this passage from Isaiah. You will probably recognize it:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are

powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

God says, "I love you, you are mine." "You are my child, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." God sees worth in you, power in you, and delights in you, even though you fall short as every human does. Sometimes, I think we just need to hear it, and even though it is simply said, at least it is said. God loves you
...no but
...no and
...just that God does.

Let your light so shine before others so that they may see

your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Amen.