

Fear Not
Isaiah 43
Week 8

Opening Prayer

Ask if anyone would like to open in prayer. They can pray on their own or use the prayer printed below. It also might be a good idea to reach out to a group member prior to your meeting and ask them ahead of time if they'd be willing to open in prayer. That's a great way to encourage participation without putting anyone on the spot.

Gracious God, as we come together to place our lives in front of your Holy Word, we pray that you would give us wisdom and understanding. May we approach this sacred text with humility, curiosity, expectancy and love. Be among us and in our conversation through the power of your Holy Spirit. We pray in the name of the one to whom this whole story points, Jesus the Christ, amen.

Depending on time constraints you may want to take a bit of extra time to check in with folks and see how they're doing. You could also wait and do this at the end of the session before closing in prayer.

Check-in question

Each week, give an opportunity for folks to either respond to the check-in question below or, if they'd rather, share something that came up for them as they were reading the other texts assigned for the Big Read this week.

This week's passage is given to people in the midst of great transition as they are about to return from exile.

Would you classify yourself as someone who welcomes change or do you find change difficult? What are some possible reasons for how you feel about change?

Background

Chapters 40-55, the portion of the book of Isaiah that deals with the end of the Babylonian exile, is often referred to as Second Isaiah. It begins with the words, "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem; and call out to her that her service is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received of Yahweh's hand double for all her sins" (40:1-2).

The penalty mentioned in these verses is the exile. Because the people of Jerusalem sinned, God allowed Babylon to destroy their city and to take them into exile as slaves. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C., and took its inhabitants into exile. It is now five decades later, near the end of the exile. During this period, the people have done a good deal of soul-searching. They have asked themselves if Yahweh is truly God and, if so, why has he allowed the Babylonians to destroy God's temple and to exile God's people. They have asked themselves whether they made a mistake by worshipping God. Perhaps Marduk, the god of the Babylonians, is stronger than Yahweh.

Isaiah prophesied trouble ahead for Jerusalem because of the failure of its people to be faithful to Yahweh. It is clear in chapters 1-39 that the blame for the exile lays squarely at the feet of the people of Jerusalem. They have played the whore. The exile is the punishment for their sins.

The mood shifts in chapters 40-55, written by Second Isaiah (probably a disciple of the original Isaiah). Written near the end of the exile, these chapters begin with words of comfort (40:1-2) and hold out the promise of return to Jerusalem.¹

“But now thus says Yahweh” (v. 1a). “But” in this verse is linked to 42:21-25—verses that speak of Judah's disobedience and Yahweh's anger. The use of “But” in this verse assures us that Yahweh's anger is history. The new reality of chapter 43 is that of Yahweh's love and the redemption of God's people.

“he who created you, Jacob, and he who formed you, Israel” (v. 1b). In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). In like manner, he created the nation Israel. That creation began with the call of Abram (Genesis 12:1) and continued through the lineage of Isaac, Jacob/Israel, and Israel's twelve sons. But it was in Egypt that Israel's family grew to nation-size, and it was in the Exodus that they first became an independent nation. This mention of Israel's creation, then, is the first allusion in our text to the Exodus story.

“Don't be afraid, for I have redeemed you” (v. 1c). The words, “Don't be afraid,” appear frequently in the Old and New Testaments (42 times), but especially in the book of Isaiah (15 times) and most especially in Second Isaiah (10 times).

Fear is a common human condition. These exiles, who have endured a half century of servitude with no end in sight, have reason to be afraid. Can they look forward to anything other than more of the same? Will they forever be servants of the Babylonians? Is there any hope that they will one day be free?

¹ *Sermon Writer: Resources for Lectionary Preaching.* <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/old-testament-isaiah-431-7-commentary/>.

The prophet, speaking for Yahweh, assures them that, in spite of their suffering and the apparent hopelessness of their situation, they need not fear the future. The reason is that Yahweh has redeemed them. For Jewish people, this word, “redeemed,” would bring to mind their understanding that the firstborn, human or animal, belongs to the Lord and must be redeemed by the payment of a price. This practice has its roots in the Passover, where the Lord killed the firstborn of Egypt but allowed the Israelites to redeem their firstborn with the blood of a lamb smeared on their doorpost (Exodus 11:1-13:16). This use of the word, “redeemed,” is the second allusion in our text to the Exodus.

“I have called you by your name. You are mine” (v. 1d). For these people, names are important. A person’s name reveals the person’s character and identity. In key moments in Israel’s history, God named particular people. He changed Abram’s name to Abraham, “for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17:5). He changed Jacob’s name to Israel, “for you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed” (Genesis 32:28)—and Israel’s name became the name of the nation. The bestowing of a new name, then, is tantamount to conferring a new identity—acknowledging a new character.

Yahweh’s calling Israel by name constitutes a kind of adoption ceremony that signifies that “you are mine” (v. 1d)—that Yahweh is the parent and Israel is the child.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned, and flame will not scorch you”(v. 2). Yahweh has named Israel and Israel belongs to Yahweh, so Israel can count on Yahweh’s protection. The promise is not that Israel’s way will be easy or without danger, but rather that when exposed to danger Israel will be neither overwhelmed nor consumed.

“Pass through the waters” is another allusion to the Exodus, where Israel passed unharmed through the waters of the Red Sea to escape the pursuing Egyptian army, but the pursuing army was overwhelmed by the waters, eliminating the threat to Israel (Exodus 14-15).

Some scholars think of “pass...through the rivers” as an allusion to the end of the Exodus, when Israel finally crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land (Joshua 3). That crossing might seem to have posed little danger compared with the crossing of the Red Sea, but that is hardly how Israel perceived it. When Moses sent spies to view the land of Canaan, the spies returned with this report: “We came to the land where you sent us; and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is its fruit. However the people who dwell in the land are strong and the cities are fortified and very large.... There we saw the Nephilim: ...and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight” (Numbers 13:27, 33).

It would not be until later, when Joshua sent two spies to Jericho, that Israel would hear the voice of faith proclaiming, “Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands; moreover all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us” (Joshua 2:24). Clearly, these later spies understood that it would not be their strength that would make the land theirs, but the Lord’s strength.

The fire and flame of v. 2b are metaphors for any danger, but would also evoke vivid memories for the exiles who had watched Jerusalem burn.

“For I am Yahweh (YHWH) your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” (v. 3a). God has spoken of naming his people. Now he reveals his own name in four dimensions: (1) Yahweh (2) your God (3) the Holy One of Israel and (4) your Savior. As with other names, these names reveal the identity and character of God.

“Yahweh” (Hebrew: *YHWH*) is the holy name of God, the name by which God revealed himself to Moses (translated “I Am” in Exodus 3:14 NRSV). It is the name used for God in the Psalms, the prophets, and several of the historical books of the Old Testament.

The other three names, “your God,” “the Holy One of Israel,” and “your Savior” all emphasize the relationship of Yahweh to the nation of Israel and its people. Israel belongs to Yahweh, and Yahweh belongs to Israel.

“I haven given Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in your place” (v. 3b). The Jewish sacrificial system is basically a ransom system in which the lives of animals are sacrificed to ransom people from the penalty for their sin (Leviticus 17:11). However, the Psalmist acknowledges, “None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give God a ransom for him. For the redemption of their life is costly, no payment is ever enough” (Psalm 49:7-8). Nevertheless, “But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me (Psalm 49:15).

In the New Testament, Jesus says, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). Paul says, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:5-6).

So Yahweh is saying that he will purchase the freedom of the exiles. In some manner, his payment will be Egypt, Cush, and Seba.

“Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and I love you” (v. 4a). Yahweh is the lover and his people are the beloved. It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and Yahweh clearly sees the Jewish people as beautiful. That is not because they are wiser or stronger or more comely than other people, but because Yahweh has chosen them and established a covenant with them and made them his own.

Parents understand the principle. Our children might not be more wonderful than other children, but we love them because they are ours—whether naturally or by adoption. Because of our love, we make sacrifices for them that we would not make for other children. That is the way that Yahweh loves these exiles.

We might wonder how Yahweh, who loves these people, could have allowed them to suffer exile. This is another place where there are parallels to parenting. Good parents understand that tolerance of bad behavior is a prescription for future trouble. Even though it might be painful to the parents as well as the child, good parents set limits and impose punishments—not to exact revenge but to encourage appropriate behavior. The exiles had sinned, and their exile is the price that they are paying for that sin. But their punishment is coming to a close, because Yahweh loves them and has redeemed them.²

“Don’t be afraid, for I am with you” (v. 5a). At the beginning of the first section of this text we read, “Don’t be afraid, for I have redeemed you” (43:1). Now, at the beginning of the second section, we read the same “Don’t be afraid,” but a different reason is given—“for I am with you.” While the two reasons for not fearing are different on the surface, they are identical at the core. These exiles need not fear because they can trust Yahweh to meet their deepest needs.

“I will bring your seed from the east, and gather you from the west. I will tell the north, ‘Give them up!’ and tell the south, ‘Don’t hold them back! Bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth’” (vv. 5b-6). These verses promise that Yahweh has the power to scour the whole earth in search of those who belong to him. He has the will to bring his scattered people together, regardless of where he might find them.

“everyone who is called by my name, and whom I have created for my glory, whom I have formed, yes, whom I have made” (v. 7). Earlier, Yahweh said, “I have called you by your name. You are mine” (v. 1). Now he speaks of “everyone who is called by my name,” suggesting that the name that he has given them is his own name. If we are God’s people—and we are—then we were created in God’s image and bear God’s name.

Impact of Exile

Some of the Israelite people had been taken into exile in Babylon while others remained in the land, but both groups suffered to varying degrees the debilitating effects of being a conquered people.

Physically, economically, culturally, and religiously, the people felt the might of Babylon, and it seems that one of the tasks of the prophet was to rebuild the people’s understanding of themselves as God’s own people and to reassure them that their God was fully capable of taking on the Babylonian superpower in order to save them.³

² *Sermon Writer: Resources for Lectionary Preaching.* <https://sermonwriter.com/biblical-commentary/old-testament-isaiah-431-7-commentary/>.

³ Plunket-Brewton, Callie. *Working Preacher: Commentary on Isaiah 43:16-21.* <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-isaiah-4316-21-2>. 17 March 2013.

Isaiah 43 begins with a formula familiar to any reader of the prophets: **“Thus says the Lord.”** These words are the traditional introduction to a prophetic oracle and occur in this chapter three times (verses 1, 14, 16). What follows the three instances of this expression in chapter 43, however, is not the expected divine oracle but a character reference of sorts for the God on whose behalf the prophet is speaking.

The God addressing the people is none other than the God who **“makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse... they are extinguished, quenched like a wick!”** (verse 16b). The image is stirring and visual and highlights the power of God over both the forces of nature and military might, a power to which the Exodus, the foundational story of the people of Israel, attests. The similarities between Isaiah 43:16-17 and the description of the miraculous rescue of the people at the sea in Exodus 14 and 15 strongly suggest that the prophet is invoking their cultural memory of that dramatic story of redemption from Egypt.

The foundational narrative of the people is an impressive story to bring into play, but it is hardly surprising to find a reference to this story of redemption in the context of Isaiah 43. In fact, there are references throughout this chapter to the history the people and God share. Verse 1 refers to God as the one who **“created,” “formed,” “redeemed,”** and **“named”** them. Verse 7 notes that the people were, in fact, named after and created for God’s own glory (see also verse 21). Clearly, the prophet wants the people to see that their own identity as a people is intertwined with the identity of their God. They are inextricably linked.

It is fascinating that the prophet, having gone to so much effort to invoke the past, continues in verse 18 with the injunction: **“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old!”** The command is surprising and serves as an effective rhetorical device to get the people’s attention, for the prophet is not content to have the people wax nostalgic about the “good old days.”

It is not on the past *as the past* that the prophet wants the people to concentrate. The prophet aims to create an imaginative space in the minds of the people so that their conception of the past can transform their understanding of the present and, thus, the future: **“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”** In a seemingly hopeless situation, the prophet calls on the people not to lose heart but to look with anticipation for the signs of God’s approaching redemption, for the “new thing” that is coming.

The **“new thing”** is described in non-specific language that seems to refer to the past even as it points to the future. Water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert in verses 19b-20 suggest a link between the Exodus journey and the return of Judah’s exiles from Babylon. The animals mentioned underscore the desolation of the land through which the people will travel on their way home and serve to remind the people of their ancestors’ journey out of Egypt and through the wilderness.

Jackals and ostriches (there they are again!) are associated with the wild places, the uninhabited and uninhabitable land, and yet, the prophet assures the people that they need not fear such places. Even the wild animals that live there are amazed at the marvelous deeds of this God who “**gives water in the wilderness.**” A journey through the wilderness will be hard, but the grace and power of God prevailed in the past and will do so in the future. The past is, even now, repeating itself: “**Do you not perceive it?**” the prophet cries out, compelling the people to begin looking around them in hope.

In times of uncertainty and fear, Isaiah 43 urges us to be alert for the signs of God’s continued presence, working to sustain and redeem even to this day.⁴

Read Isaiah 43

-focus in on verses 1-7 and 18-21

Initial Reactions

1. What from this story confuses, inspires, or resonates with you? What questions or curiosities do you have about this passage?
2. What does this story tell us about God? What does this story tell us about humanity?
3. Were there any images, stories or insights that stuck out to you from Sunday’s sermon?

Going Deeper

4. God uses very personal words in this passage to describe the relationship He has with His people. Identify these descriptions. How does such a personal relationship with God impact you?
5. What historical event is God reminding Israel of in 43:1-2 and 43:16-17? Why would this give hope to Israel in exile?
6. As noted in almost any commentary on this passage, these words from Isaiah were originally meant to comfort and assure a defeated Israel living in the midst of the Babylonian Exile, and the refrain “do not fear” was specific to the turmoil and unsettledness of that context.
 - a. What are the fears that threaten us today?
 - b. What are the “waters” and the “fires” that you/we are going through in our time for which we need such comfort and assurance?
7. In verse 18, God said, “Forget the former things; do not dwell in the past.”
 - a. What can happen to our faith, vitality of spirit and direction in life when we dwell in the past?
 - b. How is dwelling in the past different from drawing on the past to face the future with confidence?

⁴ Plunket-Brewton, Callie. *Working Preacher: Commentary on Isaiah 43:16-21*.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-isaiah-4316-21-2>. 17 March 2013.

So What Questions

8. In verse 19, God said, “See, I am doing a new thing.” He then paints a word picture of streams of water bringing forth life to plants and animals in the desert, something which would have been familiar to the Israelites, who lived in an arid land. God is telling us that the new thing that He is promising to do will bring restoration, rejuvenation and life to the parched, barren lives of His people.
 - a. What may have caused the lives of God’s people to become parched and barren?
 - b. Have there been times when your life was parched, barren and lacking life?
What might have been some contributing factors?

Closing

Check in if you haven’t already done so and ask for any prayer requests. Encourage group members to write down these requests and follow up as necessary. Close with prayer.