

“Do Not Be Afraid”

Isaiah 43:1-7

July 13, 2025

The Biblical text for today was spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah. The time was near the end of God’s people being punished through the exile. The words were said to comfort God’s people, to remind them that God had not forgotten them. They were not alone.

The text begins with these words: “But now...” The word “but” introduces something new. **Now**, God says. Don’t look **back** on the exile. Now, focus on **this**: I am your Creator. Do not fear. I have redeemed you now, and in Jesus you will be redeemed once again. I have called you by name. You are mine.

Preacher Stan Mast tells of the importance of names here:

[Names] matter a great deal. It means we’re not alone, not lost, not ciphers in the crowd. My wife often tells the story about shopping at Christmas time in a huge mall near us. The aisles were packed with people. She was bumped and pushed like a calf in a stampede. She was about to escape to her car and her home, when she heard a voice from above. “Sharon, hey Sharon.” She looked up and there, above her on the escalator, was an old friend who had seen her in the mob. She felt instant relief and joy. “I have summoned you by name, you are mine.”

But it’s not just the mob that makes us want to escape; it’s also the water and fire that threaten to destroy us. The words of verse 2 are some of the most realistically powerful Gospel words in the Bible. The images of water

and fire emerge in many crucial places in the Scripture. Israel is delivered from Egypt by the exodus through the Red Sea and ushered into the Promised Land through the parting of Jordan. They are led by a pillar of fire in the wilderness and Daniel's three friends survive the blazing furnace through the intervention of a mysterious companion in the fire. Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan and John the Baptist said that Jesus would baptize with fire.

God continues to speak: When you experience challenges and difficulties, I am with you. I love you. I am with you.

God reminds his people: I created you in the beginning in the creation event. I saved Noah and his family. I called out of you Abraham and Sarah to be my people, my covenant people. Incorporating the words of "passing through the waters," God continues: I brought you out of bondage in Egypt through the Red Sea. I brought you into the Promised Land through the Jordan River. I will further redeem you in Jesus.

God says again: Do not fear, for I am with you. At the end of time, I will call all of you out together. I have created you for my glory, and you will proclaim that glory in word and in deed.

These words have been said before: But now,/ do not fear,/ I have called you by name,/ I have created you,/ I have redeemed you,/ you are mine/, I am with you./ All these things have been said in the Bible.

But three little words have **not** been said. They are the words: **I love you.** Preacher Jonathan Davis tells us that this is the only time in scripture where God says those three little words.¹

Davis goes on to tell this story:

In John L'Heurux's story titled "The Expert on God", the main character is a Jesuit priest, who for a long time, has been overwhelmed with doubts about his faith. Doubts about the Trinity, and the Virgin Mary, and the Divinity of Christ. But finally, he develops a doubt that won't leave him: he begins to doubt the love of God. One day, after saying Mass one morning, he is driving home. On the way, he comes across a terrible accident. "A young man lies dying, trapped in an overturned car. The priest is able to force open the crumpled car door and manages to cradle the man in his arms. Taking a vial of holy oil from his pocket, the priest anoints the dying man, pronouncing, 'I absolve you from all your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.'

But, then, nothing happens. There is no shift in the world, no change in the dire situation, no word from heaven, not even any human rescuers. Only the silent world and the dying one's 'harsh, half-choked breathing.' The priest begins to pray – recited prayers, rote prayers, prayers about Mary, prayers to the Father in heaven. He feels foolish, but what else can he do, what else can he say?...

...What could anyone say to this crushed, dying body, he wondered. What would God say if he cared as much as I?...The priest could see death

¹ Jonathan Davis, "The Center of Everything."

beginning across the young man's face. And still he could say nothing...the boy turned – some dying reflex – and his head tilted in the priest's arms, trusting, like a lover. In the final lines of the story, at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gives up his prayers, and bends down to this stranger's ear and whispers, 'I love you,' and continued until there was no breath, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.'"

In the end, the reader is left with a question: What do you think? Do you think he resigned from the priesthood in that moment? Do you think he finally let go of his faith? Or do you think...maybe...in that moment...he was redeemed?

Preacher Kathleen McShane² writes that this passage from Isaiah is what gets her through difficult times. She says it reminds her of what it is her faith tells her. She writes,

And for me, those words speak what I know for sure, what I would stake my life on, about the universe: that at its center is a God who will never let us fall so far that we cannot be found or broken so badly that we can't be reclaimed and made whole. I know this deep down inside of me. I trust it. I have found it to be true over and over again in my life. And here's how I know it's God rather than some comforting thing I've made up in my head: these words are an echo of our Scripture, the book where we know we will always find God. There in the words of Isaiah we read this morning: Don't 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. ... I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. The writer of this part of the Bible

² Kathleen McShane, "This I know for Sure."

we know only by the name Second Isaiah. But we know something about the time and context he lived in. Israel had been through something...A war in which they had lost everything: neighbors, family members, their homeland. Their temple—the building where they believed God lived—was destroyed. Their very identity as a people was shattered. And in the midst of all that, at their worst, most desperate moment, they heard a voice that said, ‘I have called you by name. You are mine. Wherever you are, however wrecked you feel, I will come and find you.’ The prophet who wrote those words into the mouth of God was someone who must have known that even when there is no end to suffering in sight, there is a God who promises that ultimately, all shall be well. That is still true.

I can't say enough here about God's promise that he loves his people, he will be with us, and all shall be well. This is our faith; these things are true.

Preacher Meg Junista³ writes:

The two “fear nots” in this passage are especially important, not only for their calming surface value but for the history they invoke. In Genesis 15, when God first covenants with Abraham, the first words uttered by the voice of God are “Do not be afraid, Abram.” Again, to Isaac, the voice of the LORD speaks in a dream, saying, “I am the God of your father, Abraham. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” And, at last, with Jacob, God again says, “I am God, the God of your father, do not be afraid to go down to Egypt...”

³ Meg Junista, “Isaiah 43:1-7.”

Over and over again, the reverberating voice of the LORD is muted to the soft undertone one uses when approaching an injured animal or an overwrought toddler. “Fear not.” And you can almost hear the people of Israel’s collective sigh of relief. And God’s assurance of love continues through the text.

Preacher Scott Hoezee adds:

*The other striking feature to these verses is the use of the little word “When . . .” in verse 2. This is one of the more famous of the Old Testament but in our imaginations we too often assume that the promises here run along the lines of God’s saying that his people will **avoid** deep waters, raging rivers, and fiery trials altogether. But that, of course, is not what is being promoted here at all. Indeed, one could properly assume based on these verses that believers in Yahweh may all-but expect to face such trials. The promise is not wholesale avoidance of difficulties but an abiding divine presence in them.*

Here, too, however, we find a tension set up even within verses as redolent of hope as these... Because the simple and unhappy fact of the matter is that when we pass through the waters or the fires of life, those are precisely the times we find it the most difficult to locate that sense of God’s presence. First off, we wonder why such trials would come if God is on our side (yet we’re never promised to be spared such things—Jesus even promised persecutions for his followers!). Secondly, however, the pain that accompanies such things can so easily blind us to whatever signs of God’s presence we might be able to find. It is more than good to know, in short, that God sticks with us in life’s trials.

So how has this past week, this month, this year, been for you? Do you feel like you have passed through the waters and the fire in some way? I do, in some ways, but then I think of the adults and children who were at Camp Mystic this past week when the flash flood occurred. And I think of something else God says through Isaiah in this passage. God says: **I have created you for my glory, and you will proclaim that glory in word and in deed.**

We are part of God's people today, and we are to point the way to God as well. We are not to be afraid, but to show God's glory. So how have you done that this week, this month, this year, even in the midst of the waters and fire?

Amen.