

February 18, 2015
Isaiah 41:14-16

Ash Wednesday
God Has a Word for That

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our Lenten King. Amen.

If you could become any animal in the world, which one would you choose? Maybe, like Isaiah, you would soar on wings like an eagle. Or, like Amos, perhaps the lion is your animal of choice because you love the strength and beauty of the king of the jungle. Or maybe, like Elisha, you boast in the bear because, when it comes to obstacles, you maim and you maul. Or if your name is Caleb—which in Hebrew means “dog”—you just might choose to be a sweet and adorable little dog. I have always thought that if I had to be an animal I would want to be a dog being raised in a good home.

Question for you: How many of you would like to become a worm? May I see a show of hands? That’s just what I thought. None of you are worm wannabes! I don’t blame you. Worms have no arms, no legs, and no eyes. They’re small and insignificant and, if you ask me, worms really don’t have a personality either. They are good for fish bait though.

In Isaiah 66:24 we read about worms: ²⁴ *“And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”*¹ We also read about them in Jonah 4:7: ⁷ *“But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered.”*² With these verses we see that worms are CURSED BY GOD!

No one ever stops their car and says: “Hey everyone, take a look at that worm!” When have you read an editorial that passionately argued: “We must cease the ongoing genocidal atrocity taking place in our lakes and rivers! Worms deserve better! These cute creatures should not be skewered on hooks, just so they can be fed to the fish!”

Can you imagine the worm being any team’s mascot? Will we ever hear of the Los Angeles Leaches or the Michigan Maggots or the Washington University Worms? I don’t think so. I don’t think the University of North Dakota will be looking at the worm as there next mascot.

Our text in Isaiah 41:14 calls God’s people a worm: *“Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob.”* Why does God call the exilic community in Babylon a worm? Didn’t He get the memo that calling someone a worm isn’t the way to boost self-esteem or encourage people to get up and get going?

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Is 66:24). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Jon 4:7). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Buried under the boot of Babylon, in Isaiah 40-55, the exiles are also called weak and weary, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, deaf and blind, childless, widowed, divorced, and a stubborn rebel from birth. God has a word for that: worm.

The parallel though in our text equates “O worm Jacob” with “those who are dead.” Isaiah’s poetic parallelism invites us to compare dead people with worms. Dead people are buried—so are worms. Dead people are stepped on—so are worms. Dead people are surrounded by dirt—so are worms. Dead people are ignored and soon forgotten—and so are the worms.

The exiles had seen terror on every side. The patriarchal and Davidic promises appeared to be null and void. The captives are caught in a culture where their most treasured narrative and liturgies are being mocked, trivialized, or dismissed as being simply, irrelevant. Everything had been swallowed up by the beast called Babylon.

This hopelessness is epitomized in Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” And then in verse 6 David says, “I am a worm and not a man.”

Now, what should I think of myself when I am captive to sin and so far away from the Father? When I don’t “act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with my God?” When I’m not aflame with holiness and feel no compassion for the lost? What am I to think of myself when I take no delight in the Word, recoil from prayer, harbor lustful thoughts, and pant for the praises of people? What am I when I am deceptive, mean-spirited, petty, and vindictive? God has a word for that: WORM!

“Pastor, didn’t you get the memo that calling people a worm isn’t the way to boost self-esteem or encourage us to get up and get going?”

Actually, no I didn’t. Because thinking highly of ourselves has nothing to do with God’s Word. Rather He longs for us to cry out with Isaiah, “I am a man of unclean lips”; and with Job, “Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”; and with Paul, “O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death!” This is what Lent is all about. It is acknowledging who we are in God’s sight—sinful and unclean in thought, word, and deed. Lent is when we confess these sins, grieve over them, and repent before Almighty God. You see, only people who are dead and buried and surrounded by dirt cry out for life and resurrection!

Hear the word of the Lord. Isaiah 41:14: “Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O dead ones of Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

The Lord is not some football coach trying to rally his team to “win one of the Gipper.” Nor is He some talk-show host who want us to feel warm and fuzzy all over. Our God is not some sentimental granddaddy who helps those who help themselves. No.

He is “your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

The word “redeemer” appears here in Isaiah 40-55 for the first time and will come eighteen more times in this section. A redeemer is your next-of-kin relative who buys back your inheritance, frees you from slavery, and pays off your debt. Whatever has gone bad, your redeemer will make good. Job confesses: ²⁵ *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth.* ³ We then learn what Job received from His redeemer: ¹⁰ *And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends. And the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before.*⁴

Coupled with Redeemer is the phrase, “the Holy One of Israel.” It appears in the book of Isaiah twenty-five times and only seven more times in the Old Testament. He is, as the seraphim cry out, “holy, holy, holy!” It means the Lord is completely set apart and different from everyone and everything else.

Isaiah couples your Redeemer—the completely immanent One—with the Holy One of Israel—the completely transcendent One. In this way, he announces that the Lord alone is able to marshal every power in the universe for a single, loving, furious, relentless goal—to bring us love and life, forgiveness and salvation!

How does He do it? In the fullness of time, God became our next-of-kin-relative, literally. And then he took another step. He became, dirty, despised, and dismissed. But then he took another, almost incomprehensible step. It was one for the ages.

Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” Or, in His native Aramaic language, “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabathani.” And then verse 6, “I am a worm and not a man.” Here is Jesus, nailed to the tree, His body bent and twisted. Here is Jesus, a bloody horrific mess. Here is Jesus, mocked, ridiculed, and abandoned. God has a word for that: WORM!

He did it all for you. And so God’s transforming word to us is exactly this. Isaiah 41:15 and 16, “*See, I am making you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff.*”

“You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them. And you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.”

Worms become mountain movers! The lowly and despised are loved and lifted up. Our Lenten sackcloth and ashes are not the last word. ON Easter they will be exchanged for baptismal robes washed white in the blood of Jesus. *“The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor.”* God also has a word for that: GRACE! Amen.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Job 19:25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Job 42:10). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.