

January 10, 2016
Isaiah 43:1-7

Baptism of our Lord C
Our God Redeems

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

It always seems that this time of year is rough on a lot of people – perhaps it's the post-Christmas blues or it's the reality of winter starting to hunker down and stay for a while. Many people seem to be down in the dumps this time of year. You and I have just come through a crazy hectic Advent and Christmas Season, only to encounter life that continues to move after Christmas and New Year's. We have the personal issues...trying to stay on track with our New Year's Resolutions of eating healthier, exercising to maintain our health. We have the recovery of over-spending during the Advent and Christmas season and facing the high credit card bills, not to mention taxes, whether that be property taxes, income taxes or a whole host of other bills that need to be paid. Perhaps we are worried we forgot to acknowledge someone during the Holidays. There's also the fact that we face disappointments when we don't live up to our own expectations or the expectations of others. Perhaps these issues cause us to become down on ourselves or perhaps cause us to feel depressed, oppresses, and stressed.

It's not just these issues though that we face. We also have the struggles of the outside...with work, school, family, sports, the larger community, and even into the larger world. When all these things come together and all the other individual pressures, anxieties, and struggles join forces – no wonder we feel oppressed, stressed and depressed. Sometimes we can feel like we are living in exile – like strangers and foreigners living at home without being carried off. Sometimes we feel so burdened, depressed and oppressed that we truly do wonder whether anyone really cares, even God himself.

It's times like this...you know when you are oppressed, depressed, and stressed that you feel like you need to go off and find something to minimize the pain. You begin to form idols, other gods in your life that take the pain away for a while, but it soon comes back again and again...no matter what you try: alcohol, drugs, smoking, gambling, sex. Whether it be even the healthier things of running, your sports or lifting weights. Perhaps you sit back and turn on the TV and let your imaginations fly trying to forget about what's happening in life. Maybe you even try to become over involved with your work that you hope life goes on easily. But the reality of being oppressed, depressed, and stressed is still there, and you continue to feel like you are in exile in your own life.

We're in good company! Isaiah is writing to the Israelites who are living in Babylonian exile. They were away from everything they knew as familiar. They were living in a foreign land as a defeated people. They just heard these words from Isaiah in chapter 42: *22 But this is a people plundered and looted; they are all of them trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become plunder with none to rescue, spoil with none to say, "Restore!" 23 Who among you will give ear to this, will attend and listen for the time to come? 24 Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? 25 So he poured on him the heat of his anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand; it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.*¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Is 42:22–25). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Their hopes and dreams of the future had all but dried up and disappeared. All they wanted to do was return to their homeland. Ultimately it was their priorities that led them into exile. Ultimately it was idolatry against their God. Ultimately it was their constant worship of other gods that led them into exile. That's why God led them there, that's what we heard about in Isaiah 42. You see sin causes us to have these same down in the dump feelings. For Israel, out their "singing the winter blues" so to speak; out of their hurts, pains, struggles, and anxieties comes a wonderful, upbeat message of Good News from their one God. The prophet delivers a message to them that is filled with God's love and hope; restoration and deliverance; affirmation and acceptance. Listen again to these words of what God promises to do for these oppressed, depressed, and stressed Israelites living in exile:

"Fear not, 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, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, 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 up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar 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."

For a people that is down and out...what a fantastic message! This message is upbeat and full of hope. This message clarifies who God is..." I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel. I brought you out of Egypt. I love you. I am with you...I will bring you up again." This message clarifies who Israel and most importantly, whose Israel is. God comes to Israel as the Great Initiator in this message...not Israel going to God. God comes to Israel in one of their most depressed, vulnerable moments. God comes when they feel like they are down and out and at their lowest. God comes and picks them up yet again. He reminds them of their true identity. He reminds them they He has redeemed them. God comes and acts in a beautiful, loving, affirming way. God assures them they have not been forgotten...they are indeed special to God...they belong to God...they are loved by God...and they will be restored and delivered out of their exile by God. What a wonderful message of hope!!

As I was preparing for this message today, I came across this story that was told:

A fellow bought an old organ which had been magnificent in its day, but now it was dilapidated, banged up and hardly played at all anymore. So he called in experts from all over the world, hoping they could restore it.

When they had finished the organ looked like new. The little angels were shiny and clean; the ornamental carved leaves had smooth curves and corners. The blotchy varnish was gone.

The old organ still had a problem...the insides were sitting in boxes on the floor. The owner continued to advertise for organ experts to fix and restore his organ. But no one could do it.

One day, a little hunched over, half blind old man knocked on the door. The butler laughed at him saying, "What makes you think you can fix it? We've had experts here from all over the world."

But the owner overheard the discussion and answered saying that it couldn't hurt to try. So the old man set out to work. After several days, he had the organ operating like new. When asked how he could do this, he replied, "I made it."

"I MADE IT!" I made you...I redeemed you...I have called you by name...I love you...you are mine..." That's what God says and does for you and me. That's our true source of hope and deliverance now and in the future. As the maker of the organ was the one who could best fix and restore and give new life to the organ because he made; so, too, God who created each one of us is The Only One who can truly fix, restore, and give new life to each one of us. It doesn't matter how oppressed, depressed, and stressed you are, God can and does and will lift us up and deliver us from all of our forms of exile.

As the message of hope comes to the children of Israel, that same message of hope comes to you. There was instance in your life when God called you by name, when he chose you to be his own. It's one of the greatest blessings of my vocation, when I am used as the hands and mouth of God when I say a person's name whether it be an infant, child, or an adult who has come to faith late in life and then I pour the water over that person's head and say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The message of your baptism is real...that is when the Lord redeems you...brings you up of our exile of your original sin (the sin that you inherited from your first parents, Adam and Eve). He takes you in baptism and you are crucified with the Lord of Glory...St. Paul writes in our Epistle for today...⁶*We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.* ⁷*For one who has died has been set free from sin.* Since in Baptism we die and are free from sin, we also rise with him we are given life eternal. ⁸*Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*

The words of comfort and hope to the Children of Israel work much the same way as the words of comfort and hope through our Baptisms. Our Baptismal covenant is what gives us the assurance of God's true identity and our true identity. It's through that that you hear the words, "you are precious, you belong to God, you are one with Christ, your whole life is bound to be lived out in the service of Christ and His Church.

In your Baptism, God has called you by name...perhaps he would even say those words that Isaiah spoke to Israel: *"Fear not, 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. ...* ⁴ *Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.* ⁵ *Fear not, 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 up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar 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."*

He didn't give men in return for you, he gave one man...Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ at His Baptism in the Jordan was really another Epiphany...He was truly revealed as God's Son and then he would go off to be tempted and begin his earthly ministry. Jesus Christ was bound to His service to His Father and also to His Bride, the Church. He put it all on the line, even his very life so that you can have life, and He even promises that He is coming back to gather all of the faithful to be with him for eternity.

When you were baptized, God called you by name and gave you a vocation...your duty in life...the most important one you have...Christian. A servant of the Most High God. You are actually part of the priesthood of all believers on account of your baptism. You are made priests through water and word. Some people would call you ministers in affirming the priesthood of all believers. One of these people is Rev. William H. Willimon, a Methodist preacher who said this, "Pastors are only here to help you ministers do your ministry, not to do your ministry for you." I might say it like this..." Pastors are only here to help you priests do ministry, not to do your ministry for you." When the members of the church of God, the members of the royal priesthood of God rely on God's ordained Pastors to do their ministry for them...two things can happen: One the ministers or priests become too co-dependent and passive and unrealistic in their expectations of their pastors; and two the pastor become workaholics and eventually become either seriously disgruntled or ill or burnt out or all of these put together.

In an old jury roll call in Sussex County in England in 1658 there is a list of 39 Puritan name. Among them are the following: The Gift of God String; Live in Peace Hillary; Joy from Above Brown; More-Fruit Flower; Faint-Not Hewett; and Search the Scriptures Morton. There was also a young Puritan maiden listed who, when asked for her baptismal name, replied: "Through Much Tribulation we Enter the Kingdom of Heaven," but for short they call me Tribby." If we were to follow this practice today, what might we be called? Certainly all of us should be called: "Grace given to me Smith" or "Give God the Glory Jones" or even "Redeemed in Christ Johnson"

You are indeed Redeemed in Christ...called directly by your name to be one of His children, so that you can live in hope and comfort even when your life is down in the dumps...even when you suffer from those post-Christmas blues, even when you seem to be oppressed, depressed, and stressed. For Remember that God in Christ has redeemed you. For Christ says, "I love you, you are mine! I called you by your name so that you can live with me and serve with me."

In the name of the One who redeems you, Christ our Lord. Amen.

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.