

March 4, 2015
Marked

Midweek Lent 2
Isaiah 44:1-5

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

Shelly Jackson is not only an author, she's a walking piece of literature. She has a tattoo on her right wrist that reads, "S-k-i-n" yes *Skin*. It is actually the title of Jackson's latest project, which she calls "A Mortal Work of Art." The plan is that her 2095-word story would be published exclusively in tattoos, one word at a time, on the skin of volunteers. Once a volunteer is accepted into the project, they are known only by the word they bear on their skin.

It's not that everything I do has to be tricked out with gimmicks and games," Jackson said. "I'm just interested in exploring the range of what a text can do." At last count, Shelley Jackson was still looking for people to bear her final three hundred words. Just thing, we could contact her after church, offer our human hides and be part of a counter-cultural narrative! How many are ready to line up to be inked with a one-word tattoo? That's just what I thought. And, truth be told—I'm not all that eager to get a tattoo either. Rob Poulos is a young man who joined this "Mortal Work of Art" and was given the word "back,". So he now goes by "back," and embodies that word in Jackson's story.

Isaiah also wants people to be marked with one word and be part of a counter-cultural narrative. He writes in our text, "This one will write upon his hand, 'Belonging to the Lord.'"

One of the ancient Near East's most dominant narratives in the sixth century BC was the Babylonian creation epic called *Elumna Elish*. The *Enuma Elish* narrates Marduk's defeat over Tiamat. He cut her in two and built the universe out of her remains. Read during the annual Akitu festival, the feast reached the pinnacle with the acclamation—in the Akkadian language—"Marduka ma surru," which, when translated, means, "Marduk is King"!

Connected to the pomp and pageantry of Babylonian religion was the empire's program of changing people's names. Just ask Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. Or maybe you know them by their VeggieTale names, "Schach, Rach, and Benny. Some affectionately call them, "Your Shack, My Scheck and a Bungalow." But in Daniel 1:7 the chief of the Eunuchs changes their names to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. The goal? Mark the Judeans with a new name that will entice them into worshipping Marduk.

But Judean exiles in Babylon didn't line up. They weren't interested in being marked by their Marker. Because, you, see, there was another text in town, "There's no place like home" was being replaced with "There's no place like Babylon." Oh no!

God's Call Upon Us People—When in Babylon, Don't Live like the Babylonians.

The dominant story of our day is peddled by the young and the beautiful who guarantee we can be young and beautiful, just like them, if we buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't even like.

Their story is hammered into our heads at an alarming rate. On a typical day in America, from the time we open the morning paper (or more likely nowadays, turn on the computer and log on to the Grand Forks Herald online or Yahoo News!) until we finally doze off in front of another rerun of *I Love Lucy* or perhaps the 10 PM WDAZ news, we will encounter more than two thousand advertising images. And these images portray over and over again the dominant American narrative—"You can buy lasting happiness!"

In league with the pomp and pageantry of American consumerism is the enemy's program of changing our names. His goal? Mark us with a new name that will entice us into seeking ultimate fulfillment in things. Deemed beloved through water and the Word, Satan renames us cheap, dirty, and worthless. Deemed washed and cleansed in the name of Jesus, he whispers to us, "Guilty as charged." Designated as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," the liar brazenly boasts, "It's all fiction, it's all fantasy, it's all a figment of your imagination."

Put together, the dominant narrative. We are like the Rolling Stones, who no matter how hard they try, can't get no satisfaction. We are all worn out from believing the dominant American story. O God! We need an alternative narrative!

Enter Isaiah 40-55, where the prophet takes dead aim at the empire. Babylon is a drop in the bucket. Babylonian leaders are nothing. Babylonian gods are an empty wind. Marduk is a fantasy, a fake, a fraud, a huge phony.

And the alternative narrative in Isaiah 40-55 is just getting revved up! "Comfort, comfort, my people, says your God." "Forget the former things, do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing." God is stirring Cyrus to get Israel out of Babylon and He is raising the Suffering Servant to get Babylon out of Israel. The whole program is summarized in Isaiah 52:7: "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, 'Your God is King.'" And taking another shot against Babylon and every other seductive and satanic story, the Lord maintains that His story lasts forever. The Lord promises that His story does what it says. Isaiah 55:11 states: "So shall My word be that goes out from My mouth, it shall not return to Me empty." We are the subject of God's story, so much so that we line up, each one, and "write upon our hand" not "belonging to Babylon", but "belonging to Yahweh."

Our God has told His Story on people's bodies, call it Skin! In Genesis 4:15, the Lord marks Cain. In Genesis 17, the Lord gives Abraham and his offspring the covenant mark of circumcision. Deuteronomy 6:8 describes people tying God's words on their

hands and binding them on their foreheads. In His vision, the prophet Ezekiel sees the Lord command a man to use a writing kit to put His mark on the foreheads of the faithful.

And it all points to the most awesome story ever told on human skin. Isaiah describes this body, saying, “His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, and His form marred beyond human likeness....Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed him not....We all like sheep have gone astray. And the Lord has laid upon him the iniquity of us all.” And then these words from the Suffering Servant: “I gave my back to those who strike, and My cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting.” One spear, three nails, and a crown of thorns left their marks on Jesus. Did they ever!

But first the Ten, and then climactically Thomas, saw Jesus alive; and what shall we call that story? Call it *Skin*. Our Savior showed His skin. He is forever marked with scars announcing for you, right here, right now, His loyal love and His free forgiveness and His everlasting grace! And so people began lining up to be marked.

Paul puts it this way in Galatians 6:17: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” Eyes marked with tenderness and kindness; a smile marked with delight and friendship; a mind marked with toughness and truth; hands marked with helpfulness and humility; and a mouth marked with Jesus and joy.

To be a part of this counter-cultural narrative, all we need to take on is one word: *leyahweh*—in English, “belonging to the Lord.” But just how does that happen? Recall the water, remember the Word, and forever cherish this liturgical rite when you were named as one of God’s children: “Receive the sign of the holy cross, both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified.”

Just because we live in our own Babylon, does not mean we will live like the Babylonians. My life and your life tell another story. We are consumed with another narrative. And what is that called? Jesus...with skin. 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.