

**ISAIAH 43:1-13:** But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. **2** When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. **3** For I am the Lord your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. **4** Since you were precious in My sight, You have been honored, And I have loved you; Therefore I will give men for you, And people for your life. **5** Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, And gather you from the west; **6** I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' And to the south, 'Do not keep them back!' Bring My sons from afar, And My daughters from the ends of the earth-- **7** Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him." **8** Bring out the blind people who have eyes, And the deaf who have ears. **9** Let all the nations be gathered together, And let the people be assembled. Who among them can declare this, And show us former things? Let them bring out their witnesses, that they may be justified; Or let them hear and say, "It is truth." **10** "You are My witnesses," says the Lord, "And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me. **11** I, even I, am the Lord, And besides Me there is no savior. **12** I have declared and saved, I have proclaimed, And there was no foreign god among you; Therefore you are My witnesses," Says the Lord, "that I am God. **13** Indeed before the day was, I am He; And there is no one who can deliver out of My hand; I work, and who will reverse it?"

**LUKE 3:16-17 & 21-22:** John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. **17** His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

**21** When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened **22** and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

A PERSON'S IDENTITY, AND BEING ABLE TO PROVE IT BY NOT ONLY ONE'S NAME- BUT SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER AND LICENSE OR IDENTITY CARD IS IMPORTANT TODAY.

THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE FOR ADULTS, BUT EVEN CHILDREN NEED SOME KIND OF PROOF TO ENROLL IN SCHOOL OR FOR MEDICAL CARE.

YEARS AGO, AN OLD MAN WHO HAD ONCE BEEN THE GOVERNOR OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, TOLD A PASTOR HE MET ABOUT THE MOMENT HIS LIFE CHANGED.

IT WAS NOT THAT HIS CIRCUMSTANCES CHANGED BUT RATHER HE WAS CHANGED INSIDE, BORN ANEW BY THE REALIZATION HE WAS LOVED AND CLAIMED BY CHRIST.

HE GREW UP IN AN ERA AND PLACE WHERE, MUCH LIKE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, A CHILD'S IDENTITY WAS FOUND PRIMARILY THROUGH HIS OR HER FATHER'S NAME.

HE, HOWEVER, WAS RAISED BY SINGLE MOTHER WHO EITHER WOULD NOT OR COULD NOT NAME HIS FATHER.

THIS CAUSED HIM TO FEEL AT A LOSS CONCERNING WHO HE WAS, AND IT LEFT HIM OPEN FOR BEING RIDICULED BY OTHER CHILDREN.

MANY ADULTS LOOKED DOWN ON HIM ALSO, AND SO HE HAD A POOR SELF IMAGE.

THIS CHANGED ONE SUNDAY AT THE END OF WORSHIP, WHEN HE HAD BEEN UNABLE TO SNEAK OUT BEFORE THE CROWD.

HE EXPLAINED HE ALWAYS AVOIDED THE PASTOR FOR FEAR OF HEARING A REMARK ABOUT HIMSELF OR HIS MOTHER.

BUT ONE DAY THE PASTOR REACHED THE DOOR BEFORE HIM. THE MAN PLACED HIS HAND ON THE BOY'S SHOULDER AND ASKED "WHO IS YOUR DADDY."

BUT THEN HE REALIZED WHO THE BOY WAS, AND THE LAD DREADED THE REMARK HE THOUGHT WOULD FOLLOW.

HOWEVER, THE PASTOR LOOKED HIM IN THE EYE, AND SAID LOUDLY SO OTHERS COULD HEAR, "I KNOW, YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD."

IT WAS THAT DECLARATION OF IDENTITY THAT CHANGED THE BOY'S SELF IMAGE, AND HELPED HIM COME TO KNOW JESUS.

SIMILARLY, TODAY'S OLD TESTAMENT READING OPENS WITH A POWERFUL WORD OF HOPE AND COMFORT, THAT HAS SPREAD DOWN THROUGH THE CENTURIES.

"BUT NOW, THIS IS WHAT THE LORD SAYS-HE WHO CREATED YOU...FEAR NOT, FOR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU, I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME, YOU ARE MINE."

AND NOW, WHAT WAS ONCE A MESSAGE FOR ISRAEL AND JUDAH, THROUGH JESUS CHRIST IS OFFERED TO ALL WHO WILL LISTEN TO THE WORD OF THE LORD.

THIS CALL IS FOR ALL PEOPLE TO TRUST IN THE LORD AND BELIEVE IN GOD'S PROMISED REDEMPTION THROUGH CHRIST- FOR ALL WHO WILL REPENT AND RECEIVE IT.

THE WORDS SPOKEN BY THE PROPHET ISAIAH FORESHADOWS THE MEANING OF BAPTISM AS WELL, AS IT DRAWS OUR ATTENTION TO CHRIST'S BAPTISM, AND ALL BAPTISMS.

GOD, INDEED, CALLS US BY NAME AND CLAIMS US AS HIS OWN SONS AND DAUGHTERS.

AND LIKE GOD DID WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN EXILE; NOW, THROUGH JESUS, ALL WHO TURN TO HIM ARE BROUGHT OUT OF THE EXILE OF SIN, INTO THE PROMISED LAND OF FORGIVENESS THROUGH CHRIST.

THE BLESSING OF OUR IDENTITY IN CHRIST EXTENDS TO CHURCHES AS WELL.

NO MATTER OUR SIZE OR INFLUENCE OR HOPE FOR THE FUTURE- CONGREGATIONS ARE COLLECTIVELY NAMED AND CLAIMED AS GOD'S OWN CHILDREN.

WE EACH ARE GIVEN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST TO BOTH SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER AND SHINE IN THE WORLD.

AND WHILE IT IS TRUE JESUS WORSHIPS WITH US EVEN WHEN ONLY TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED, HOW MUCH BRIGHTER IS OUR WORSHIP WHEN MORE ARE PRESENT.

THINK ABOUT CHRISTMAS EVE AND SINGING "SILENT NIGHT" WITH ONLY TWO OR THREE SHINING CANDLES.

THEN COMPARE IT TO THE OVER THIRTY CANDLES SHINING IN THE PEWS A FEW WEEKS AGO.

EITHER WAY GOD IS PRAISED, AND CHRIST'S BIRTH CELEBRATED, BUT HOW MUCH MORE MEANINGFUL FOR THOSE GATHERED WHEN THE LIGHT IS GREATER.

BUT OF COURSE, GOD'S NAMES US AND CLAIMS US AS THE BODY OF CHRIST IN THE WORLD FOR THE PURPOSE OF US SERVING HIM IN THE WORLD AND NOT JUST FOR OURSELVES.

WE NEED ONLY TO LOOK TO THE BAPTISM OF JESUS TO SEE THE PURPOSE OF THE BAPTISM FOR US, AND HOW IT IS MEANT TO BE THE BEGINNING OF OUR JOURNEY IN SERVICE TO GOD.

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE DESCRIBES JESUS' JOINT HUMAN AND DIVINE IDENTITY IN HIS GENEALOGY WHICH ENDS SAYING THIS ABOUT HIM: "SON OF ADAM, SON OF GOD."

THIS DESCRIPTION OF THE SAVIOR'S IDENTITY OFFERS ONE REASON FOR HIM SUBMITTING TO BEING BAPTIZED BY JOHN, AMONGST THOSE REPENTING OF THEIR SIN.

JESUS, WHO HAD NEVER SINNED, GOT IN LINE WITH SINNERS TO IDENTIFY WITH THEM, AND TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE NEED FOR THE REDEMPTION OF THE WORLD HE WOULD BRING.

JOHN THE BAPTIST POINTED OUT THE NEED TO BE REDEEMED, AND DECLARED THE TIME FOR BOTH JUDGEMENT AND SALVATION WAS UPON THEM.

JOHN USED A FAMILIAR IMAGE FROM AGRICULTURE TO INTRODUCE THE ONE WHO WOULD SOON BE GOD'S INSTRUMENT OF JUDGMENT AND GRACE.

WHEN WHEAT OR OTHER GRAIN IS HARVESTED AND THE STALKS ARE SEPARATED FROM THE GRAIN, THERE REMAINS A SHELL AROUND IT.

THIS SHELL, LIKE THE SHELL OF NUTS, IS INEDIBLE AND MUST BE REMOVED. FIRST IT IS POUNDED TO BREAK IT, THEN IT MUST BE SEPARATED FROM THE GRAIN ITSELF.

JOHN SPEAKS ABOUT THE WINNOWING FORK, A TOOL USED TO TOSS THE WHEAT KERNELS INTO THE AIR SO THAT THE SHELL SEPARATES FROM THE GRAIN.

THIS IS AN IMAGE OF JESUS' MINISTRY TO COME AND THE RESULTS OF HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION WHICH WILL SAVE THOSE WHO BELIEVE IN HIM.

WHEN JESUS STEPPED INTO THE WATER AND WAS BAPTIZED THE FULFILLMENT OF JOHN'S MESSAGE OFFICIALLY BEGAN.

WHILE JESUS PRAYED, IMMEDIATELY AFTER HIS BAPTISM, HE HEARD HIS FATHER'S VOICE AND RECEIVED HIS COMMISSION TO BE THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD, ALONG WITH A FRESH OUT POURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

CHRIST'S MINISTRY IS EXPLAINED IN THE BIBLE AS THE MEANS BY WHICH OUR DEBTS TO GOD ARE CANCELLED.

WE UNDERSTAND THIS IS MADE POSSIBLE BECAUSE JESUS TOOK OUR SIN UPON HIMSELF ON THE CROSS.

COLOSSIANS 1:19-20 EXPLAINS THIS ABOUT JESUS, SAYING:

"FOR IN HIM THE FULLNESS OF GOD WAS PLEASED TO DWELL, AND THROUGH HIM GOD WAS PLEASED TO RECONCILE TO HIMSELF ALL THINGS...BY MAKING PEACE THROUGH THE BLOOD OF THE CROSS."

HERE IS A STORY THAT MAY HELP US SEE MORE CLEARLY WHAT THIS MEANS.

MANY YEARS AGO, A MAN ENTERED A BANK IN NEW YORK CITY TO SEEK A LOAN.

HE SAT AT THE DESK OF A BANK OFFICER AND GAVE HIM THE HIS COMPLETED PAPERWORK.

THE BANKER EXCUSED HIMSELF AND WENT TO ANOTHER OFFICER TO CONFER.

HE BEGAN TO WORRY WHEN HE SAW THE WHISPERING, THEN ONE OF THE THEM MAKING A PHONE CALL.

MORE TIME PASSED AND THE MAN BECAME EVEN MORE WORRIED HE WOULD NOT GET THE LOAN.

BUT THEN THE OFFICIAL RETURNED FROM THE MANAGER'S DESK SAYING IT WAS GRANTED, HE JUST NEEDED TO WAIT THERE A LITTLE WHILE LONGER.

SUDDENLY, THE MAN WAS SURPRISED TO SEE A COUPLE OF MEN WITH CAMERAS, AND THEY TOOK HIS PICTURE WITH SEVERAL BANK OFFICIALS.

PEOPLE GATHERED AROUND SMILING AND SHAKING HIS HAND. FINALLY, THE BANKER EXPLAINED TO HIM WHAT WAS GOING ON.

HE SAID THAT THE MONEY HE HAD JUST BORROWED INCLUDED THE BILLIONTH DOLLAR THAT INSTITUTION HAD LOANED.

HE WAS TOLD THAT IN HONOR OF THIS GREAT OCCASION FOR THE BANK THE MAN'S ENTIRE LOAN WAS FORGIVEN, HE WOULD NOT HAVE TO PAY HIS DEBT TO THE BANK.

THROUGH JESUS OUR DEBTS TO GOD ARE FORGIVEN, HE PAID THE DEBT FOR OUR SIN WE NEVER CAN.

BAPTISM IS ONE OF THE WAYS WE CLAIM THE GIFT JESUS PROVIDES FOR OURSELVES AND OUR CHILDREN.

OF COURSE, BAPTISM ALONE IS NOT A TICKET TO SALVATION, BUT RATHER AN OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE THE SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT TO LIVE AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS.

INDEED, MUCH LIKE JESUS' BAPTISM WAS NOT THE FULFILLMENT OF HIS MISSION BUT IT'S OFFICIAL BEGINNING, SO ALSO CHRISTIAN BAPTISM IS MEANT TO BE THE FIRST STEPS ON OUR JOURNEY AS A CHILD OF GOD.

ONE OF THE HYMNS IN OUR HYMNAL EXPRESSES THIS, SAYING:

“WONDER OF WONDERS, HERE REVEALED; GOD’S COVENANT WITH US IS SEALED.

AND LONG BEFORE WE KNOW OR PRAY, GOD’S LOVE ENFOLDS US EVERY DAY.

HERE IN THIS SACRAMENT WE SEE GOD’S GRACE UNBOUND FOR ALL... MAY WE RESPOND WITH JOYFUL PRAISE IN LOVING SERVICE ALL OUR DAYS.

THIS CHILD OF GOD, THOUGH YOUNG OR OLD, WE WELCOME NOW INTO CHRIST’S FOLD. TO KNOW WITH US GOD’S LOVING CARE, HERE ALL OUR JOYS AND SORROWS TO SHARE.....”

HERE WE HAVE THE COMMUNAL NATURE OF BAPTISM DESCRIBED.

WE ARE CALLED AND BLESSED INDIVIDUALLY, BUT ALSO COMMUNALLY AS A CHURCH, TO LOVE AND SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.

BUT LIKE JESUS AND HIS FIRST DISCIPLES DID NOT GATHER TOGETHER FOR THEIR OWN BENEFIT ALONE, SO ALSO EVERY CHURCH IS BORN TO LIVE BY SERVING THOSE OUTSIDE OUR FELLOWSHIP AS WELL.

AND, IN JESUS AND THE TWELVE, WE ARE ALSO REMINDED THAT SIZE IS NO BARRIER TO SERVING GOD OR TO DRAWING OTHERS INTO FELLOWSHIP WITH US.

SIZE DOES NOT MATTER WHEN WE ARE OPEN TO CHRIST’S CALL AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, AND WILLING TO DO SOMETHING FOR JESUS IN OUR COMMUNITY AND WORLD.

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT STEPS WE CAN TAKE TO MOTIVATE US TO DO BETTER FOR THE LORD IS TO HEAR AND EMBRACE THE IDENTITY GOD GIVES TO US:

“DO NOT FEAR I HAVE REDEEMED YOU; I HAVE CALLED YOU BY NAME YOU ARE MINE.”

YES, CHRIST HAS REDEEMED US. HE HAS RANSOMED US WITH HIS OWN BLOOD, PAYING THE DEBT FOR OUR SIN, OVER AND OVER AGAIN.

AND IN LIGHT OF GOD’S GRACE, THROUGH HIS BELOVED SON, CHRISTIANS CAN HEAR IN ISAIAH 43:10 ONE OF THE RESPONSES GOD SEEKS FROM US:

“YOU ARE MY WITNESSES, SAYS THE LORD, AND MY SERVANT WHOM I HAVE CHOSEN....”

LET US PRAY:

GRACIOUS GOD, WE COME TODAY WITH JOY FOR YOUR BAPTISM; WE COME WITH PRAISE FOR YOUR GLORY; WE COME WITH GRATITUDE FOR YOUR LOVE.

WE GIVE YOU THANKS THAT YOU KNOW US EACH BY NAME AND YOU LOVE US. SEND YOUR SPIRIT UPON US, WE PRAY, THAT OUR HANDS AND OUR HEARTS MAY DO YOUR WORK IN THE WORLD.

AS WE OFFER OUR LIVES TO YOU, BLESS US WITH YOUR STRENGTH, THAT WE MAY JOIN WITH YOU AS INDIVIDUALS AND A CONGREGATION TO REAFFIRM OUR BAPTISM AND OUR COMMITMENT TO CHRIST. MAY WE EXPERIENCE ANEW THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

MAY WE RESPOND TO YOUR WONDERFUL GRACE AND FAITHFUL LOVE BY REACHING OUT TO NEIGHBORS AND STRANGERS LIKE, SERVING YOU BY SERVING THEM. IN CHRIST’S NAME WE PRAY. AMEN

SERMON SUMMARY: ISAIAH 43:1-13 & LUKE 3:15-17 & 20-22

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