Redeemed

A Meditation on Isaiah 43: 1 – 7 and Luke 3: 15 – 22

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church January 9, 2022

Don’t fear, 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;
    when through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you won’t be scorched
    and flame won’t burn you.
**3**I am the Lord your God,
    the holy one of Israel, your savior.

…the promises of God, powerful promises of redemption and salvation for God’s people

**21**Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, **22**and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

…the absolute delight of God as parent, God, unrestrained, bursting forth from heaven in symbolic form, rejoicing over their son.

But both of these texts also offer us some difficult images, images which we can’t simply ignore. To do so would only lessen the intensity of the hopes contained here.

As we read the Isaiah, I wonder if you caught that part about ransom? Verses 3b - 4:

I have given Egypt as your ransom,
    Cush and Seba in your place.
Because you are precious in my eyes, you are honored, and I love you.
    I give people in your place, and nations in exchange for your life.

That should give us pause. What could this mean? God values some lives over others? While we hear language such as this throughout the Hebrew scriptures, how we understand it for our own context matters. We can’t simply, as some Christians choose to do, take verses like this to mean that God is on “our side,” that God will stand with us over and against others. To do so denies Jesus’ own words of redemption for the sake of the world.

We have seen how thinking such as this increases divisions amongst us. We sometimes – even if don’t say it out loud – wish our enemies would be thrown under the bus for our sake.

But why this language here, what is this ransom about?

One simple way to explain it is that God was ransoming Israel from the powerful nations. “In the sixth century BCE, the Persians, first under Cyrus and then others, conquered many nations, including Babylon, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba. As a result, in 539 BCE, the Jews in exile in Babylon were allowed to return to their homeland.” [[1]](#endnote-1)

“God,” writes Cory Driver, “was not trading peoples, but working through the events of international politics to provide relief to a displaced people while the nations raged.” [[2]](#endnote-2) The poet claimed and interpreted these events as God’s redemptive work.

All of this ties in with the idea of the “kins-person redeemer,” (goel) an extended family member who was responsible for “protecting, defending, avenging” their family. If someone had fallen into difficult times, and sold their property or even themselves into slavery, the redeemer was responsible for restoring their freedom.

Isaiah picks up this idea to explain God’s redemption of an exiled people. Their exile was of their own doing, but God, ever faithful, calls them by name and brings them out of exile. God restores them, saves them, redeems them.

They have been through difficult waters, but God was by their side.

They have been through difficult waters, but God gathered them home.

John meets Jesus in different waters. Baptismal waters. We think of baptismal waters as freeing and refreshing, and those are true images. But if we look at how Luke tells the story, we have to recognize that baptismal waters may also hold the invitation to trouble, good trouble, as John Lewis would say.

Did you notice that as we read the passage from Luke, we skipped verses 19 – 20. That’s the way the lectionary creators set it up. I imagine they didn’t want to detract the focus from Jesus and the image of his baptism, the trinitarian scene of delight as Jesus prays in the waters.

Here are the words we passed over:

***19****But Herod the ruler had been criticized harshly by John because of Herodias, Herod’s brother’s wife, and because of all the evil he had done.****20****He added this to the list of his evil deeds: he locked John up in prison.*

John didn’t hold back. We’ve heard him call people “vipers,” and we have heard him confront people, challenge them to live truthful lives, lives of integrity. John didn’t shy from calling out political leaders for their misdeeds. These two lines are a despondent counterpoint to the joy of Jesus’ baptism. We know what will happen to John, that his fate is sealed, and we wish this news could have been saved for another time. We wish we could just stay in the glow of God’s delight over Jesus, the Spirit flying over Jesus’ head with gleeful abandon.

But that’s not what Luke gives us. He needs us to know the reality of the baptismal commitment. He wants us to see what John has done, the risks he has taken, the courage with which he has walked in justice and truth. And of course, he wants us to know this because John is the precursor to his cousin, Jesus.

Jesus will go farther than John, disturbing those who believe he is a threat to worldly power. The funny this is this – he never was a threat to worldly power, not in the way they thought. He was only a threat because he called ordinary people into a different way of seeing the world. He offered the promise then, as he does now, to an abundant life that has nothing to do with riches or power or fame. He offered an abundance that is experienced through service and sacrifice, through laboring for justice.

When we remove the words about John’s activism, we soften Jesus’ baptismal call. We make it a “feel good” experience only rather than a washing of empowerment.

This isn’t in any way to say we shouldn’t baptize infants and children – we should! And we should do so with joy. But we must also teach them as they grow, teach them what happened on the day of Jesus’ baptism, tell them the truth of the risky life of being Christian.

We have been called by name, ransomed and redeemed. Not in place of others, but alongside others. May we live into the promise of our redemption every single day. Amen.

1. Long, Thomas G.; Green, J., Long, T., Powery, L., Rigby, C. and Sharp, C., eds; Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, vol. 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) p. 162 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Driver, Cory. Working Preacher, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-isaiah-431-7-5>, Accessed 8 January 2022.

Resources Consulted:

First Reading Podcast

Working Preacher (<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/baptism-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-isaiah-431-7-5>)

Connections, Year C., Vol 1.

Left Behind and Loving It exegetical blogpost [↑](#endnote-ref-2)