

### **Redeemed (Isaiah 43: 1-10)**

John's baptism didn't come out of nowhere. What he was doing out there in the wilderness seemed peculiar at first, but once folks got a grip on what it actually was, he apparently had some traction. That doesn't happen easily or accidentally. John had to be tapping into something fairly primal to get people to put aside their usual routines and come out into the wilds and be baptized. The Apostles kept running into people who had been baptized by John, but who had not yet learned about Jesus for decades, in some pretty far reaching places. John is considered by some to be the last of the prophets of Israel, and when you read the prophets you see where they might get that idea. The outlandish behavior, the voice crying in the wilderness, the announcement of the fulfillment of scripture, the general unconcern for what "people" thought of him, that spirit filled wildness that both inspires and frightens people. I want you to keep John in your mind for a second, and we're going to reach back to Isaiah, and we're going to talk about the big picture of how God works.

See, Christians tend to think a little bit too compartmentally about how God is presented in Scripture. We think of the Old Testament God as a sort of cosmic judge, a creator who is sort of like a landlord who gets pretty irritated with how we mess up his stuff. And there is that aspect to God in the Hebrew Scriptures, no doubt about it, but you need to understand also that the God of the Hebrews and the texts that we have been given about the covenant relationship with God are growing towards Jesus for a long time before he actually happens. As we heard from the Gospel of John, the Word was in the beginning. The stories that people told and the attributes they ascribed to God in the early days could be pretty primitive. God was essentially their personal bodyguard and defender of their tribe, the Father/Creator and disciplinarian. If they won it was because they had pleased God and followed the rules, if they lost it was because they had ticked him off and punishment was in order.

This scheme works out pretty well from the time of the exodus, when they realized that God had really been working with essentially their immediate family for generations, and even though things in Egypt had taken a bad turn, God was there, leading them out, through the waters, and the wilderness and giving them a promised land. Then come the kings and the kingdom and the growing years, the roller coaster of good king/bad king that they always seemed to be on. The problem was that their idea of God remained a bit stunted, even as they sang the Psalms and read the Torah over and over, they still seemed to think that it was a quid pro quo situation: Be good, God is happy, be bad, God is angry.

Grace honestly seemed too radical a thought, the closest they could come to was mercy. Sure, God was merciful, he had to be to keep putting up with all their little stumbles and trips. And mercy is no small virtue either, it's one of the big three, justice, mercy and steadfast love, the unshakeable pillars of God's nature. It's funny really, they began using the phrase "steadfast love," so often they sort of neglected to really think about how it related to the first two pillars. They didn't have to really, until something really traumatic happened. That something was the exile to Babylon. You may know, or have heard that there are essentially three Isaiahs represented in the one big book of the prophet Isaiah, there is the Isaiah who wrote the first 39 chapters, who is what you might consider the standard prophet. He warns a people who have lost their way of God's growing anger and impatience with them and calls them to repentance. In many ways, this first Isaiah is a lot like John, he is called and set apart and he tells the people of Israel the truth about God, whether they want to hear it or not.

This Isaiah was eloquent and passionate, and definitely a favorite. The end of the book of Isaiah, chapters 55-66 are written much later, after the exile is all said and done, when things are being rebuilt

and the people need hope and guidance to avoid making the same mistakes again. But the chapters between 40-55 are the part of Isaiah that was written during the exile. The stuff that was directed at a people who were not safe, happy and free, who had experienced the end of everything they knew. The prophet who is called Deutero-Isaiah or Second Isaiah, takes up the mantle of prophet after everything has come crashing down and tries to figure out something to say besides, "I told you so!"

So he starts with, "Comfort, O comfort my people," in chapter 40 and spends some time reassuring folks that God has not abandoned them. We're still there in the beginning of 43, but there's something, an idea emerging out of the mist: and it starts with a reminder that God has made them and of course tells them not to be afraid, they are redeemed! They are redeemed right then and there, not someday when the exile ends, but there. God is with them when they go through the water and the fire and all sorts of trials, but then, and this is the real kicker: God tells them via the prophet why that is true. "Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you."

Let that sink in for a minute. Hear the echoes of that in "This is my son, the beloved, with him I am well pleased." God's steadfast love remains, even after justice has been carried out and mercy has been strained to breaking. Often, we have to get to that place where everything else has failed before we will listen to that truth. The pillar of all pillars is that truth, right there: God loves what God has made, all the other stuff that happens is rooted in that truth. Love is essentially what redeems us and it defines what it means to be redeemed. It's the center of every human story of redemption, learning to love something more than you love your own ego. When we love we are in the image of God.

All of the sudden, I find myself kind of overwhelmed in realizing how many different parts of the New Testament I could start rattling off. It's because love is so central to the identity of God, as the letter of John says, "God is love." Jesus doesn't cause God to love us or allow God to love us, from the very beginning Jesus shows us that God's love is central to who we are. Before you make any other leaps or moves, remember that we are beloved, and so we are redeemed. The prodigal son is not redeemed because he repents, he is redeemed because his father loves him.

It's always tempting for us to lapse back into some emphasis on being good, sliding back into moralism or legalistic ways. It is, in fact, quite logical for us to notice the fact that we seem utterly depraved and incapable of being good. It is healthy for us to repent, but never forget that you are beloved. When you start with that reality, you are redeemed from a whole host of neurotic impulses and self-defeating feedback loops. Unshackle the word redeemed from all manner of dour theories of atonement for sin and understand that being redeemed is a work of love and love only, not justice, we don't deserve it on those grounds, not even mercy because even abundant mercy would be strained by some of our wickedness. Love redeems, Christ shows us what that looks like, to always be beloved, when you come through the waters and the fires. We are redeemed, we are beloved, we are witnesses.