

Isaiah 43:1-3a

1 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not 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;
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.



This is my first conscious memory of redemption.

OK, I don't like to brag, and besides, it was a long time ago; and I guess I never told you, but when I was a kid, I had a rich girlfriend. I know, I know, "Go figure!" right? But it was true and she had free access to a 1961 Thunderbird owned by her mom and dad. So at some point we broke up and later that summer when a bunch of us kids had gotten together on a Saturday morning I asked her if I could take a spin in it, since I hadn't had the opportunity to drive it while we were an item. Against her better judgment, and the fact that I'd only had my license for a couple of months, she said OK. I invited my buddy Ike to jump in and we took off cruising through the country.

Did I say it was a beautiful day? The top was down, not a cloud in the sky and we were driving through the country listening to rock 'n roll enjoying all of that when I decided to take a right onto Barnes Mill Road. A few minutes later I took another right onto Goggins Lane, which I had never been on before. Not more than a minute later, intoxicated by the beauty of the day-- and I assure you that was all-- we crested a hill, going too fast, and down at the bottom of the hill was a 90 degree turn.

Somebody had increased the degree of difficulty of that turn by placing a large rock in the middle of the road. The result of my effort to avoid that rock found us stuck in a muddy ditch. We tried everything we knew, but nothing worked and I knew I was in big trouble.

No cell phone, of course, it was 1963 everything was rotary dial land line.

But I know that my redeemer lives, and in this case it was an old tenant farmer plowing a field on a tractor nearby. And sure, for a modest fee, he would hook us up and pull us out. Ike and I had between us maybe five bucks which fortunately was enough, and after

I discovered that the car wasn't going anywhere with the transmission locked in park, and made the proper adjustment, he pulled us out and we drove back to town where shortly thereafter, while we were washing the mud off the car in Ike's front yard, we were discovered by some worried friends who thought that we had wrecked the car and ourselves.

I am convinced that each one of us has come today with some sort of understanding of God, our Redeemer. Each one of us if pressed could most likely come up with a memory of redemption, as quaint, if not more so, than the one I offered you. And like me, if you pushed the issue, it wouldn't take long and you could come up with dozens of accounts and anecdotes from your past; kind of like "count your blessings name them one by one," this would be more like, "count your redemptive experiences, name them one by one..." and "see what God has done."

Whenever Israel found themselves stuck in the mud, God showed up and pulled them out. The Book of Judges is a virtual litany of "God to the rescue". And give Israel credit, they celebrated those events and because of those dramatic rescues began to understand God as Redeemer. God was kind of like the cavalry coming to the aid of the beleaguered wagon train on the Oregon Trail. Or maybe like an old man on a 1940s era tractor pulling a fancy car out of the ditch in rural Madison County, Kentucky.

But is the Bible just an account of tractor pulls, or cavalry charges? Can we assume that God will always be there to ease us out of our mistakes and call us back to himself? Let's go back to the idea that we are here-- because whether we know it or not, or even believe it, we are able to be here today, to celebrate all of this because of what God does for us. And just like our ability to identify, to feel, and to offer love, we somehow understand God's redemptive love-- through the testimony of Holy Scripture? Well, sure, but more importantly, out of our own experience.

The Bible functions more like a dictionary that defines both love and redemption as the result of the understanding of the experience of the Hebrew/Jewish community, and then later that of the early church. Now for the Hebrews redemption marked the pillars of their faith: first in the exodus, and later in the Restoration. In fact, our scripture passage this morning is a product of the time in the history of Israel when the people designated Chosen were freed from exile by King Cyrus and allowed to return to that land designated Holy. Interestingly enough, in the second verse of today's lesson, the prophet noted that, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;*" that's Egypt and the exodus. "*And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*" that's Babylon and the restoration. In exodus and restoration, Israel believed God was acting as Redeemer, pulling them out of the ditch, whether that ditch was at the Sea, or by the waters of Babylon.

The essence of this belief, and the nature of redemption was further distilled in the opening verses of Psalm 103 where it is written,

"Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,

bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits--
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

According to the ancient poet, the initiative is God's and God initiates: forgiveness, healing, redemption, blessing, and satisfaction, "so that our (sic) youth is renewed like the eagle's." So according to our poet, God is about rescue and renewal. God is about saving.

For the early church, the emphasis was about God the Redeemer through the loving and atoning work of Jesus Christ-- symbolized by the cross.

But what about us? Where have you come from and how did you get here and what does that mean? What I'm trying to figure out is the divine significance of your being-- here--today? Beyond the fact that it is Sunday morning and you believe you're supposed to be here? What is the role that God has played in that? How have redemptive acts all our lives played a role in that? Or are those simply questions that we ought not ask?

The Bible offers ample witness of God at work in the communities of Israel and the early Church, but what about us? What are the marks of your experience and my experience that cry out the word "Redeemed!"?

Well, it's something we ought to be thinking about, because we take so much for granted. Is there anything, any power that lies behind what we "take for granted." What we assume will be? What we have come to expect as our just deserts? Have you ever wondered why me? How many times have we heard survivors of horrible accidents and wrecks thanking God for pulling them through?

I imagine when the survivors of the Titanic were put ashore many of them were talking about how God had rescued them from the icy North Atlantic. Maybe they were talking about how great God was to hear their cries for help and save them, but we must never forget the nearly 1600 souls that were not set ashore, nearly 1600 souls that never made it to the lifeboats. I wonder who spoke for them?

So here we are, I daresay for a purpose. I wonder what it is? If we examine the evidence of our lives, where we've been, where we are perhaps we can discover a clue. If we evaluate our gifts, if we spend time in prayer, may we find evidence leading to answer questions of purpose behind why we are here?

Acts of redemption can be as silly as my episode of borrowing my ex-girlfriends car for a joy ride, or as serious as life and death. Meantime *here we are!*

We are here. Three insignificant sounding words, except that the “We” speaks to dozens of people. The verb, the “are” means we exist, and the “here” is a special place and a special time of gathering. As we take a collective look back into our personal histories can we imagine God’s presence-- in hindsight, even if we couldn’t see it at the time? And now we are here. Is it possible that all of the data we could recover from our memories has led us to this place at this moment?

What does that mean? How do we treat that? Must we finally admit to the divine Power in the universe, and further note that this power cares? Otherwise why the gathering? I don’t know, it all seems so confusing, and yet one of the strengths of early Christianity was the idea of community, of being present for each other.

We stumble along on our daily walk and one day realize that everything that has happened in our lives has brought us here-- now. There are a lot of stained glass answers to why that is. What I want you to do is what I do and that is to break the stained glass and keep wondering...

Why?

A long time ago in preparation for ordination in the Presbytery of Louisville (Union) I wrote that

“God is at once near and far,
closer to my soul than my breath;
a measureless step beyond my dreams.”

In nearly 35 years since, absolutely nothing has happened to cause me to challenge those words.

Rev. Don Smith