

Week 7

Isaiah 43:1-7 "Who Are You, Compared to God?"

Begin with prayer

Loving God,

Thank you for being relational. Thank you for the opportunity to know you and to know others in your community.

Lord, sometimes life is challenging, we know you are there but we struggle to feel your presence in our lives. We ask that even in our darkest, most distant moments that we may know your presence and find comfort and peace in you.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen

Read the text for today. (Suggestion: Go around and read it out loud, each person taking a verse.)

Ask: What stood out to you about this text? What, if anything, doesn't make sense? What caught your attention and sparked curiosity?

As divine prophecies go, it doesn't get much better than this. There are two features to this passage to highlight.

The first item is easy to miss, but speaks volumes in terms of what Israel had to know and accept. At the beginning and again at the end, bracketing the larger passage, Yahweh makes clear that the people of Israel belong to Him alone:

Verse 1: But now this is what Yahweh says, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel.

In other words: I made you and so you are mine. You belong to me. I am the potter, you are the clay. Whatever shape you have, is due to my creative work. I own you.

Verse 7: Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.

In other words, my name is your name and you don't exist for your own sake. You don't exist to make a name for yourself, or to generate a national sense of glory or pride as an end in itself. No, I made you so you could glorify **me**. You exist to make me known to the nations. The bragging rights are mine, says your God!

Interesting! Apparently for the good news in Isaiah 43 to be good news for the people, they must accept their place in the divine pecking order. Israel is and had always been the covenant people of God. Their existence always pointed beyond itself to the purposes of God.

But here is the difficulty. Nations have always had a tendency to become self-serving and self-glorifying. Israel was no exception. The prophet Samuel about pulled his beard out over the people's request for a king (1 Samuel 8). Israel wanted a king so they could be "like the other nations." Samuel tried to point out that the entire purpose for Israel was precisely **not** to be like the other nations. The other nations and their arrogant, self-glorifying ways were the problem to be solved, not the model to be copied. But it didn't matter: the people wanted a king and that's what they got. Eventually they got an empire. Not much further down the road, they became a corrupt and selfish empire, filled with desires for riches and glory. They used God's Temple as a kind of national security blanket and hoped God would authorize and bless everything they did or wanted to do (whether it was in accord with the Law of God or not).

All the doom-and-gloom stuff from earlier in Isaiah was the result of their excessive disregard for the things of God; for not putting God first, for failing to realize that their national purpose was to bring glory and honor to God, not to themselves.

Israel wanted all the protections, hope, and comfort of Isaiah 43, without the reminders in verses 1 and 7 that all things are under divine ownership. This is a timeless temptation. Many preachers teach divine-driven wealth without equal talk about devotion and service to that God. They fail to acknowledge that you belong to God completely, and that God has a lot to say about what you do with the wealth or property that's been entrusted to you. Too often we want the divine benefits without the divine demands.

The other feature to these verses is the use of the word "When..." in verse 2. The promise is not wholesale avoidance of difficulties, but an abiding divine presence *in* them. The simple and unhappy fact is that we will pass through the waters or the fires of life. We still live in the shadow of dreadful mass shootings. We're only fooling ourselves if we think we can avoid these things ever again (although we must do what we can do make this horror less likely). We live in the shadow of people who died this past year. And there will be more hurt in our communities this year. There will be disappointment. The honest truth is that we have not seen our last funeral.

What we cling to in hope, however, is that God goes with us in and through life's difficulties. There will always be a new thing yet to come in God's grace and in his kingdom coming. Nowhere in Scripture are we thrown back onto our own resources. We're not told that our own optimism or strength of character is what will see us through. When the waters get deep, when the rivers in which we're sunk neck-deep get violent, when the fires of life's trials lick at our flesh, it is the abiding presence of God that reassures us. Isaiah 43 reminds us of twin facts in which we properly take comfort: first, God loves us because he made us. We were created to be witnesses to God and to give him the glory for all he is and does. Second, when we abandon ourselves to the God who made us, we may know that this God will never abandon us, even when trials come.

Let's talk about it:

- How is "belonging to God" comforting to you?
- God doesn't say, "Fear, for I have forsaken you; be dismayed, for I am no longer your God; I will not help you." Just the opposite: "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will help you (Isa. 41:10). When grace is backed by infinite power, it casts out fear. Sometimes naming our fears can help bring them into the light so that we might learn to let them stop ruling us. What are you afraid of? Take some time and make a list--either as individuals or as a group.
- Pray together to let those fears stop ruling you.
- In John 16:32-33, Jesus reminds us that we will have trouble, but that this trouble isn't the end. We will face difficulties, and we will mourn. But we don't face these things alone. Who are the people in your community that help remind you of this fact? Who in your community is facing difficulty right now? How will you lean into the comfort of God's strength and power together?