

Living Life Shaped by Grace 2021
Isaiah 43:1-7 1 Peter 5:1-8

Isaiah 43:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

1 Peter 5:1-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

**Surely one of the great-unexplainable wonders of the universe
is the endlessly-enduring grace and workings of the Lord God.**

Despite our endless failures to live consistently-faithful lives,
yet God's abiding love, forgiveness and healing-hope abounds.

We're promised that as we read from Isaiah vs. 1-3a, 4,

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.** 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. ... **Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.**

That passage was written as a word of hope and promise
to the exiles struggling and suffering in Babylon.

It's worth noting that Israel was defeated and taken into exile
because despite countless warnings given through the prophets,
the nation had continued to reject God's ways by engaging in
idolatry, terrible injustice & exploiting the poor & weak...

... and being just & righteous, God wouldn't allow that to continue,
not in the Promised Land, not amid the chosen people of God.

But the Good News proclaimed in this Isaiah passage is that
even so, God wasn't done yet, and hadn't given up on them,
and so they would go home – the nation of Israel restored.

**Truly the magnitude of God's grace, goodness & mercy
is beyond our human explanations or comprehension.**

God's gracious desire is to heal, to bless, restore and save,
which gives hope by assuring us of God's presence with us always,
and that even our worst & most horrible can't defeat God's love.

It's not that God removes us from the floodwaters or fiery flames
but that the Lord **never** gives up on us, or abandons, or rejects us.
That's an incredible assurance & call to trust God's promise,
I created and called you. I love you and I will sustain you.

(even through seasons of Covid)

It's God's promise: I'm up to something marvelous and meaningful,
and you, my chosen and beloved ones, every one of you,
have been uniquely and particularly created and equipped
to share in the fun, that life-affirming project,
and make a real & positive difference in the world.

In this broken world of trouble, confusion, struggle and strife,
through the Lord's gifts and grace entrusted to each one of us,
**God intends to love, heal and bless all of his creation,
by directing that grace to flow freely through each of us.**

Faithful is letting that grace guide every aspect of our life,
so that God's generosity, goodness and love can flow-out from us...
**... which points to our Creator who equipped and gifted us
to lead lives of faithful and meaningful discipleship.**

As we're informed by Ephesians 2:4-5, 10

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead
through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—... For we are what he has made us, created in
Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

I wonder sometimes if we really have any idea or appreciation for
just how **truly wise, grace-giving and merciful our God truly is,**
or all that the Lord might be able to accomplish through us,
or what a profound difference our faithful service could make.

The passage we read from 1st Peter **focuses on church leaders,**
but the principles involved apply to every Christian
concerning the faithful exercise of our gifts toward mission,
because every Christian has something of value to offer.
This 1st Peter text teaches about how we can do that well.

Today we are ordaining and installing church officers,
a wonderful & important event in this church's life & mission.

**Few things matter more than the faithful and humble obedience
of those who serve as leaders, as shepherds of the people of God,**

But what does it really mean, to be a church leader?

How do we understand that role, of elder or deacon?,
that calling, that authority to lead & serve the church
and help express God's grace in real & practical ways?

1st While I was in Ghana, I attended the worship-installation of
the new Moderator of the Evang. Presbyterian denomination.
As I recall, that worship service went on for about six hours ...
... but maybe I can move things along a bit quicker today.

The one thing that struck me the most even more than
the extraordinary length of that worship service...
... was that when the in-coming moderator took his vows of office:
he responded to each question by saying,
"I will with the help of God. With the help of God, I will."

The new moderator understood and fervently believed,
that to lead, to serve faithfully, effectively and well,
it would be absolutely necessary
to listen and walk-in faithful obedience with God...
... it wouldn't – couldn't happen any other way.

That is true for every servant of God, not just deacons and elders,
because even our very best and most skillful, us giving our all
our full strength and abilities **will not be sufficient...**
... and if we do try to lead or do anything in ministry all on our own,
then we will surely fall and fail in crushing disappointment.

Now I do appreciate the effort and talents you'll bring to the job.
I am grateful for all the life experiences, skills and lessons,
for everything that you or I can bring to this ministry
but even all that just isn't going to be nearly enough.

It's been discouraging & sad to observe far too many times,
that when a church officer falls away or becomes cynical,
almost invariably, their spiritual life had become stale,
disconnected and unplugged from God, our true source of power.

That is true for any Christian, but especially for church officers,
who are responsible for the care and oversight of the church
and for the spiritual nurture and growth of the people of God.

If we are to serve well in the office to which we've been called
then God must **continually** re-equip & empower us for the task,
for none of us can serve God or the church well or for very long
if we neglect, stray or are complacent **with our spiritual health.**

2nd Ministry, especially church leadership is not an easy task,
but the good news is, we don't have to do the work on our own.

As Peter wrote, vs. 1

Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory
to be revealed ...

Notice that Peter self-identifies, as an elder myself,
meaning that they share in the task of church leadership,
because faithfully-discerning and effective leadership
requires **listening to God through the council of others.**

As Presbyterians, we believe that a group in shared open dialogue,

committed to God, who are seeking God's will for the people,
are able to make **far better and wiser decisions**
than can any single person striving on their own.

Therefore, in Presbyterian churches,
ruling authority does not rest solely with the pastor,
but a shared authority with all the elders serving on session
where we can discuss, ponder and make decisions together,
just as together, deacons lead us in our ministries of compassion.

3rd Peter describes our work, and our ministry in this way: vs. 2
I exhort you, to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it--not for sordid gain but eagerly.

The shepherd's most critical task is the care & welfare of the flock
motivated by love-- love for God and love for God's people
and never, driven by compulsion, pressure or duress,
for ministry's too great a privilege not to enjoy it.

4th vs. 3
Do not lord it over those in your charge, but be examples to the flock.

Leadership isn't about status or seeking to impress other people.
Faithful service is not about asserting rights & privileges,
but from humble submission and faithful obedience to God...

... it is accepting responsibility to love and serve, and asking,
**'what needs to be done, what is best for the whole church?,
and how do we bring out the best & giftedness of others?'**
Church leadership is creating space for someone to grow.

There was a special school established to train missionaries,
where they very deliberately kept things quite rustic,
and required their students to share in dirty & menial jobs.

Over time and experience they'd observed that of their graduates,
those who became the most effective missionaries in the field,
weren't always the best scholars in the academic classes,
but generally were the ones who most willingly served,
and who didn't shirk the nasty and unpleasant tasks.

The temptation is ego, to seek power and try to impress others,
but those can be easy-substitutes for the harder task of love...
**... for it's easier to play God than to love God,
easier to manipulate people than to love people.**

True Christian leadership is about combining all of our gifts
to strengthen and build up the church and to serve our mission.

However talented and single soloist may be,
they cannot on their own produce harmony...
... and it seems that God prefers a full choir.

As the beloved people of God, as the Church of Jesus Christ,
we're supposed to be more like an orchestra or a symphony,
with all our particular gifts and offerings combined
like musicians playing their instruments together.

Sure, a single gifted musician can sound lovely and carry a tune,
but how much better and how much more inspiring and pleasing
when they play together, and listening to each other
they can blend their individual sounds into a rich harmony.

Our leadership task is to help create a culture and environment
where everyone is welcomed and encouraged to grow deeper
and can discover and develop their own gifts for ministry- **- where all God's servants are**
supported, affirmed & appreciated.

Today we are about to install a group of new elders and deacons,
new shepherds called to serve, to help nurture our faith,
to help us to live out and reflect God's love and glory
by our mission and service to our world and community.

In John 21, Jesus calls Peter to serve, and to lead the church.
Three times Jesus asks, "Simon Peter, do you love me?",
and each time Peter says, **Yes Lord**. And Jesus tells Peter,
'then feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep'

And when Jesus evaluates our Christian discipleship,
our life and our ministry as leaders, as church officers,
I don't think that it will be based upon
our successes, our accomplishments or programs.

It's far more likely, Jesus will ask, "Did you love me?",
did you love... for if we can get that part right,
then surely the rest will fall right into place.

Everybody who's listening , elders & deacons, do you love Jesus?

Then as God has called you to serve in some particular way,
so be passionate for the people God has entrusted to your care,
serve faithfully, and be a shepherd to God's beloved people.

And trusting in God's grace & promise, as my friend in Ghana said,
"I will with the help of God. With the help of God, I will."