

Because I Love You     2022  
Isaiah 43:1-7, 18-19     Romans 3:19-26, 28

Isaiah 43:1-7, 18-19 (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." Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Romans 3:19-26, 28 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

While visiting in her grandmother's home, a little girl noticed  
a very delicate and beautiful vase that was a family heirloom.  
She was told, "It's been passed down for several generations,  
so be careful because it's a precious family treasure."

Later, there was a loud crash followed by the girl's loud wail.  
Her grandmother rushed into the room and found her in tears,  
trembling & upset next to the vase shattered on the floor.

The grandmother asked her, "What is wrong? Are you hurt?"  
In anguish she cried, "I broke the family's treasure."  
Picking her up and hugging her close, her grandmother comforted,  
"Yes, but you are all right, and that's what's most important."

Later on in life, after she'd grown up, she explained one time,

"I found out that day that I was the real treasure,  
and that I was truly loved, precious and valued."

Like that grandmother's comforting and nurturing love,  
God's focus is always **beyond our failures, flaws and defeats**,  
toward a deeper relationship and wonderful new possibilities.

Our past mistakes and failings, this world and our circumstances,  
these do not **have to define** our life & reality, our values & goals,  
but rather our lives can be defined by grace, by God's promises.

Surely one of the great-unexplainable wonders of the universe  
is the **endlessly-enduring grace** and workings of the Lord God.  
Despite our flaws and failure to live consistently-faithful lives,  
yet God's abiding love, forgiveness and healing-hope **abounds**.

For example, as we are promised and assured in Isaiah, vs. 1~4,  
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.  
The people had been living in Babylon for close to 70 years,  
and they were trying to make the best of living in exile.

These were the descendants of those defeated & taken into captivity,  
and who had over time, grown accustomed to life in distant Babylon,  
and were no longer even thinking about returning home to Israel.

For the most part, they had adjusted, acclimated and settled in,  
and assumed that life in Babylon was their best and only option.

But God intended so much more for them, **to bless them beyond 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, corruption, injustice & exploiting the poor & weak.

But the Good News proclaimed in this Isaiah passage is that even so,  
God wasn't done with them yet, and God hadn't given up on them,  
and so they would go home, the nation of Israel be 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, to restore and save,  
which offers 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 faithfully brings us through as promised throughout Scripture,  
and never gives up on us, or abandons us, or rejects us.

That's an incredible assurance and call to trust God's promise,  
I created and called you. I love you and I will make a way for you...  
... even through this endless season of **Covid-19 extending into 22.**

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.

So, Babylon isn't your real home, it's not your final destination-  
- the Lord loves you, and has way more grace & blessings for you –  
in fact, God will even transform the wilderness for you. vs. 19

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the  
wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Throughout the witness of Scripture, both Old & New Testaments,  
the wilderness has been where God has ministered his people.

During the Israelites' 40-year journey through the wilderness,  
the disheartened slaves were redeemed by God's power, love & mercy.  
**They were changed and transformed into the people of God.**

**Wilderness is the place where God teaches and transforms his people,  
where God is present to his beloved ones and redirects their ways.**

From the wilderness we emerge with more trust in our God's promises,  
which brings about healing and renewal by working from within.

The message of Isaiah is this: we have a choice to make – each of us,  
a life of compromise, accommodation and decline **in our Babylon**,  
or the abundant life and purpose for which God has prepared us.  
The word of God: **I'm doing a new thing, don't you want to be in on it?**

The point of our **journey of faith** is not simply to arrive some place  
but to walk with God, being healed and transformed along the way,  
as God nurtures and saves us through the grace of Jesus Christ.

**Faith is God's gift** that enables us to receive grace and grow in it  
toward who and what we were created & blessed by God to become...  
... as bearers of God's grace & blessings out into the world.

**Faith then, is our response to God's prior mercy, grace & blessings.**

God's grace is way more than just the forgiveness of a particular sin.  
**Grace is** God's invitation to live a new life of relationship  
into a community defined by grace, by discipleship and hope,  
and by becoming all God desires and intends for us.

And 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 effective and meaningful discipleship.

**We are called to serve as conduits through which God's love can flow.**

We are each one called by God to demonstrate a new quality of life,  
in the church, and through the church out into our community,  
by living in ways consistent with reconciliation and grace.

So if we really want our faith to blossom, to bear fruit and mature,  
then we need to listen, to reflect on God's grace and desire for us,  
for then the Lord will surely reveal those particular places  
where we are in most urgent need of change & growth,  
in need of personal reformation, renewal & revival.

**Faith is also** how we choose to deal with problems & disappointments,  
**as something** God can use to teach or heal us and our relationships,  
**as a source** of an opportunity to grow into a deeper walk of faith,  
**as a gift** toward reshaping our experience of God's grace & care.

The same hard times happen to Christians and non-Christians, alike.  
The promise is not that what happens in this life  
is any different for Christians than for anyone else.  
The only difference is **how we respond** to what happens to us.

Through our problems, our faith can grow into a deeper walk with God,  
as **the Lord accomplishes** in our lives and through our living  
the purpose for which we were created, to make a difference.

That means that rather than trying to satisfy the Lord  
through our own determination, effort and hard work,  
we live by hope and trust in God's faithfulness and promises,  
having **already accomplished** what we cannot possibly achieve.

One time I bought a new car.  
I signed all the paperwork to arrange for making monthly payments.  
Then a few days later I received a very nice bonus check,  
which it was enough that I went back to the dealership,  
and was able to pay off in full the balance on my car.

Well the next month when I sat down to pay bills,  
I noticed the payment book and envelopes were still on my desk,  
but you know I didn't send in a payment...  
**... since it was already paid it off in full...**  
**... and yet sometimes we live out our lives, as if payment is still due.**

It's a terrible thing to carry the heavy burden of shame and guilt  
to feel crushed by past failures & mistakes **already** forgiven by God...  
**... for that will corrode and consume our sense of hope and joy.**

Last week we talked about the challenges of last year **preparing us**  
for something new, for our growth and journey this coming year,  
and to position ourselves to improve toward a more mature faith.

So how does it happen, how do Christians mature in their faith?  
It is not simply just having been a Christian for a long time.

**Spiritual maturity is a great deal more than just passing the time.**

And it is not that we will wake up one day, and miraculously,  
suddenly now I am a mature and well-developed spiritual giant.

There's not some snippet of information gleaned from a book or video,  
or an amazing pearl of wisdom that you hear explained in a sermon-  
-for it's not about acquiring intellectual understanding alone,  
and it's not figuring out or grasping some new fact or knowledge,  
**... it just doesn't work that way.**

My experience, my most significant moves toward spiritual growth  
toward more a mature & deeper faith, have almost always emerged  
from my worst hardships, mistakes and from painful adversity,  
**and wrestling with my most difficult questions and failures,  
and unsettling situations that defy simple or pat answers.**

In other words, when my faith has matured and ripened,  
it's been when God has had to pick me back up, dust me off,  
and remind me that his Kingdom is much more than I understand.

Growth is a mystery accomplished by God's grace, mercy and goodness,  
that has never depended on me or my good effort or accomplishments.

Spiritual maturity is a very slow, uncontrollable & uneven process,  
as we progress through this life's experiences and circumstances.

By grace our head-knowledge and understandings about God  
can be gradually transformed and deepened into trust and faith,  
into a stronger relationship of hope, gratitude and endurance  
**as the grace of the Lord increasingly influences a life.**

As we're promised in Isaiah:

Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you ... I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Yes, we are indeed precious and being nurtured & loved by God,  
and there is nothing that we'll ever do that can change that,  
which also means that it's nothing that we can do to earn or deserve,  
which is also the truth and lesson Paul is writing about, vs. 19~28

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, ... and  
the whole world may be held accountable to God. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and  
fall short of the glory of God; ... but now they are **justified by his grace as a gift, through the  
redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from  
works prescribed by the law.**

Those may be the most wonderful and powerful promises in Scripture-  
- for they liberate God's precious and beloved children  
from guilt, works righteousness and fear of God's Law.  
Those are words of incredible grace, hope, promise and truth.

Paul is insisting that it's not about religious Law and tradition,

but it's entirely the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ,  
and that there are no boundaries or limitations set by grace,  
**because our good deeds are not why God loves us, heals and saves us,  
or nurtures our faith toward greater depth, trust and maturity.**

As I thought about that this week, I realized that unfortunately,  
I cannot give you 8 basic steps or specific simple techniques  
that will guarantee an immediate spiritual transformation...  
... because it's less about being something we achieve and accomplish,  
than it is about something of grace that we can choose to receive.

As we are assured in Isaiah,  
Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you,  
Paul can boldly and truthfully declare,  
by **his grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a  
sacrifice of atonement by his blood, **effective through faith.**

The Good News is, as in our Meditation today,  
So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything  
has become new! For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, **so that in him we might become  
the righteousness of God.** (2 Corinthians 5:17, 21 NRSV)