

“Claimed, Redeemed, Sent”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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As we are about to hear in our Hebrew Scripture reading, it seems God negotiated with terrorists. I don't know that for sure, but I thought saying it might catch your attention.

In our Isaiah lesson, the people of Israel are scattered to the four winds. We call it the exile. Earlier in his prophecy, Isaiah makes it clear the dispersion to the north, east, south and west was caused by the people's disobedience. They liked to follow other gods that seemed more fun than their own. And while they kept ritual, they forgot to follow the spirit of God's law to care for the weakest and most vulnerable of the community.

In our reading, Isaiah has received word God wants them back, and God is willing to pay a ransom to the nations holding them. The image of ransom is rooted in the Jewish practice of redemption. I tried to think of an example in our own lives. Taking a ticket to the dry cleaner to pick up an item is one way of claiming something that is ours. Perhaps a pawn shop would be a better example, where one has given up something of one's own for a time, but finally have the resources to redeem it. Yet, neither the dry cleaner nor pawn shop capture the power and intimacy of God making a claim for, and redeeming God's own people; perhaps, the power of what God does is actually like a negotiated prisoner exchange with terrorists.

This intimacy is captured in the second verse of our Isaiah reading: *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

[reading of Isaiah 43:1-7, then introduction to Gospel reading]

In this lectionary year, which began with the first Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist has already appeared in three of the first seven Sundays – actually, four times, if we count him kicking his mother Elizabeth while still in the womb. After today, we pretty much say goodbye to John and his followers.

All four gospel writers understand John was a dominant figure at the same time as his cousin Jesus. He was a strong preacher and had many disciples. In our reading, we will hear the people considered him to have Messiah credentials and pondered if he was the expected one. Even after his death by Herod, John's followers will maintain his ministry. So, each gospel writer, writing in the latter part of the first century, had to include a place for John, while also pointing the way to Jesus, not John, being the Messiah, the Christ.

What better way to establish Jesus as the Messiah than for John himself to acknowledge Jesus to be more powerful than him, and also deem himself unworthy in comparison to Jesus? That's what Luke chooses to do in 3:15-17, 21-22:

*15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

*21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

Staking a claim on land, or for gold, is something we understand from the old west, though we know those claims often conflicted with the rights of native people. Today, one cannot simply stake one's claim on land. To be able to say, "This land is my land," we formally stake our claims with registered deeds; and even if another holds the mortgage, we talk about it as our property.

Staking a claim on a person is a whole different matter. It sparks memories of the historic evil of slavery in this country, and its modern twin of indentured servitude. Staking a claim on a person implies subservience at best, and ownership at worst. We don't claim people as our own, our possessions, and I think rightfully avoid language, even if uttered in jest, such as "he belongs to me," or "she is mine."

Yet, a claim on people is exactly how we talk about baptism. Whether an infant who cannot yet speak the name of God, or an adult who is baptized with a profession of faith, the act of baptism is considered to be the mark of God's claim on that human life.

To help us move from a resistance to the idea of being claimed or owned by another, we can look to our Isaiah reading to help us understand God's way of claiming. Our lesson echoed the images we uplift in Christian baptism, with God being the one who:

- Creates us and forms us;
- Redeems us and calls by name, saying, "You are mine."
- And promises to be with us through the waters that will not overwhelm.

In Jewish law, one could indenture oneself to another member of the community to pay off a debt. The debt could not be forever, for there was provision for a Jubilee year, when all debts were to be forgiven and all people set free. Yet, before the Jubilee year arrived, a person could be redeemed out of their bondage. The key to understanding God's redemption, God's claim, is in knowing such redemption was normally done by a loved one, next of kin, close family.

Therein lies the power of the image in Isaiah. The position of God as redeemer is an intimate one, a God with the closeness of family. God has claimed and redeemed Israel from neighboring nations. God is the people's next of kin, who pays the ransom to free them and bring them home.

Our relationship with God is in our being claimed in baptism, but even more, we regard the redeemer God as close kin, which in turn makes us family to one another. We are family because God has staked a claim on each of us. And, as with Israel, God's claim on us is an antidote for fear – because I have redeemed you, because I am with you, there is no need to fear.

We discover in Jesus' baptism by John, that God's claim is not a stand-alone event. Jesus comes out of the water, just like all others baptized that day. Luke alone tells us Jesus prayed, and then all heaven broke loose – not with a thunder and lightning strike, but the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Then the voice, and the claim: *You are my Son, the Beloved*. We will read the same words as an announcement on the first Sunday of February, at Jesus' Transfiguration.

Beyond the claim of God uniting us in our baptism, the bestowing of the Spirit binds us further. When John spoke of himself and the Messiah to come, he differentiated himself in two ways. The first was that intriguing statement about sandals I hear as a double negative: *I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals*. Placed in cultural context, John was placing himself below a servant, hired by a rich person to take off their sandals at the end of the day and wash the dirt and mud from their feet.

The second differentiation John announced was between his baptism of water and the Messiah's baptism of Spirit and fire. Both water and fire cleanse. Fire has the heat to refine or destroy, as well as clean. John then offers the example of the threshing floor. For me, this image of the threshing floor and the Holy Spirit linked this passage with the life of the church, and particularly this day when we commission and install new officers.

A reminder about threshing grain in Jesus' time. There were no steam powered threshers. Wheat or barley sheaves are shaken to separate the seed, the kernel of grain, from the stalk, but often there is still chaff clinging to the seed. In biblical times, the grain would be placed in a threshing barn to keep it dry and allow it to dry. Then, with two opposing doors of the barn open to allow a cross wind, the grains would be thrown into the air over and over. The lighter chaff would be blown outside by the wind to be burned. The kernels of wheat or barley would fall down to the floor to be gathered and ground into flour.

As I was reading about this text, one writer's observation struck me: "The real power on the threshing floor is the wind." [Feasting on Word Year C, Volume 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 239)] It is an obvious fact, but it set my mind spinning about the wind and the church on this day when we recognize our new leaders and look forward to a new year.

We can be baptized, and claimed, and redeemed by God. We can profess our faith in Jesus Christ and commit ourselves to being his disciples. We can elect officers as leaders of the church, and commission and install them to serve. Yet, without the wind, nothing happens. Without the wind, the wheat and chaff stay mixed up together.

Sometimes there is no wind and the thresher must wait. The wind, the Spirit, is not something one can find or buy. Yet, I think sometimes our threshing, our work falters because we fear opening up both doors of the threshing floor to allow the wind to blow through. We know the wind might blow around more than chaff. It could blow out the door some of our dearly beloved, but light traditions. It could blow away our stubborn clinging to a favorite style of worship or music or ministry. It could cause us to lose to the wind our cherished political or social beliefs when touched by the wind of Christ's Spirit. Sometimes, it is easier not to open up the doors to the threshing floor, or just crack it open a little.

Still, we know, without the wind of the Spirit, and our doors and hearts and minds open to feeling its blowing power, the church remains stagnant. We end up standing around throwing the same wheat grains into the air over and over again, but nothing really happens, and the grains stay mixed with the chaff.

This forms my invitation and challenge to, and hope for our new officers, as well as those who continue to serve on our boards and teams, and in fact the whole church. Throw the doors open. Take a risk to let the wind blow through. People have done it before in this church, and when it happens, there is rejoicing and growth. So, I encourage all to resist the temptation to just open the doors partially, for fear of letting too much wind blow through and upset things.

We expect this will be a year of great opportunity in the life of this congregation, including the call of a new pastor to journey with you in ministry. Still, we also know those claimed by God are not immune from suffering, or times of confusion and even fear. As family, united in our baptism, we will stand with each other, and be pastorally present to one another in hard times.

It is often leaders in the church who feel the fears of the future most profoundly. They hear people worry about membership and money. Again, we can support one another, and stand with each other to counter such fears.

My hope during this year, with our new officers and with the whole congregation, is we will alleviate any fear of throwing wide open the door to the threshing floor, so we can fully share together the adventure God's Spirit has in store for us. A new pastor will come and join you. May she or he find the doors wide open. Even better, perhaps there are no doors, for the walls are down to open the congregation to the world, where all can see, and we can come and go in mission.

We can do so, because just as Isaiah assured a people in exile, God still claims us by saying:

I have called you by name. I am with you. I will redeem you, because you are mine. ... And I am yours.