

Morning Meditation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” Isaiah 43:1b-3, 4a

Did your parents ever tell you the story of how they chose your name? Perhaps your name goes back generations, so you are connected to a great, great, great grandparent. Perhaps your name comes from a special relationship with a family friend. When we were selecting names for our children, both times we settled on the middle name first. Both our children’s middle names have a connection to a family member, we are saying to our children, “There is an important connection here.” We then had to find a first name that matched and could avoid as much middle school teasing as possible. If the Jewish rabbi, Abraham Heschel, is correct that ‘words create worlds.’ Your name creates a world. Maybe you have had moments in your life when you have felt like you had to live up to your name, especially if you shared a name with a relative you admired. Or other times you wanted to change your name because you wanted to inhabit and embody the world that name brought to mind.

Names matter. **Your** name matters.

Isaiah said to people centuries ago, that God called you by name. In the Christian church we echo this foundational, faithful truth at baptism by pouring water on you while saying, speaking your name. You are claimed and known by God; Isaiah proclaims. You are already redeemed, restored, renewed, even when every fiber of our being objects; even when the evidence of the news wants to protest; God’s grace cannot help by hold and enfold us. But we get pulled by the words that are creating other worlds. We need to return time and time again to the truth of God’s love. This is one of the reasons why Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopal churches have baptismal fonts at the doorway of the sanctuary. You dip the tip of your fingers in to remember your baptism, to remind yourself that you are named and claimed by God.

Isaiah begins by reminding the people in Exile to not be afraid. I realize telling people, “Do not be afraid,” doesn’t always help, because those words suggest what we should not do. Yet, Isaiah gives us a faithful way to live without fear controlling the radio station of the soundtrack to our lives. Here is the prayer practice: feet flat on the ground, settle into the chair where you are sitting, feel its support like God’s strength upholding you, breathe in to the count of four and exhale to the count of six or seven. Repeat this until your shoulders finally release some of the tension that is sitting there. Repeat until that knot in the stomach starts to loosen. Then, repeat this mantra seven times, “(Your name), you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid”. Seven times. “Wes, you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.”

Return and repeat this practice as needed and necessary throughout today.

Prayer: Let these words sing to my heart and find fertile soil in my soul to grow. Amen.

Morning Meditation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” Isaiah 43:1b-3, 4a

How did the prayer practice of centering yourself and repeating the mantra, “(Your name), you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid”, go yesterday? Honestly, was it helpful? Were there moments your mind started pinging all over trying to present ways that such words were sounded like a religious speechifying or even foolishness?

Or were there moments of stress and strain yesterday when you were saying the mantra through clinched teeth that your jaw still hurts this morning? Notice Isaiah isn’t trying to suggest/say that if we root ourselves in God’s persistent love that everything is suddenly pony rides beside a chocolate river. Just because you say the mantra doesn’t magically make the overwhelmingness of life right now suddenly disappear.

The mantra is this call to return to the truth, especially when we find ourselves facing a challenge or feeling like everything is going to you-know-where right now. Isaiah says, “When you pass through the waters.” Usually water relaxes and renews and refreshes and restores me. I love being by water. One of the hymns in my heart is, “When peace like a river”.

But...

But in ancient times, water was unpredictable and a symbol of chaos. We live with that truth too. Right now, in the Atlantic, there are several storms brewing. Hurricane Sally is about to make landfall and bring flooding. Science tells us that the energy of the wave and moisture in the atmosphere are stirring and swirling in a dance that can be destructive if the energy turns into a hurricane. Water can bring us peace. Water can cause a panic...fear. Water can be unpredictable. Water is vital to life. Without it, we will perish. Water flows through us. Water is neither all good or all bad, but rather both, and.

Just like life.

How is this truth washing up on the shore of your life right now? What moments yesterday brought you peace like a river? What interactions still churn chaotically like a wave crashing in your soul? After you dive and swim in these questions for several moments, I invite you to settle in, feet flat on the ground, breathe in and long exhale out, and say the prayer below several times.

Prayer: (Your name), you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.

Morning Meditation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” Isaiah 43:1b-3, 4a

Here we are trying to surf the world as we encounter and experience the reality around us...as well as what is within us. Here we are trying to stay afloat amid the waves that come crashing down. Here we are trying to navigate our boat through the waters of 2020.

I wonder if part of what Isaiah was doing here was a riff on the resilience of faithfulness needed for daily living. Isaiah ministered to people in exile. People who had been carted and carried away from their homes in Jerusalem to live under the watchful eye of the Babylonian empire. People's lives had been turned upside down. Babylon had burnt the temple, the center of faith, to the ground. Babylon had wrecked the holy city where God was believed to reside. What do you do when life as you know it no longer exists? How do you worship God in new ways? Like say, when in-person worship has been suspended because of a pandemic and you need to learn technology so that you can try to offer something meaningful to people. Imagine that?

Part of what Isaiah is saying is that we have been here before. Isaiah, in exile, is calling on the collective memory of their ancestors who had experienced/lived through the exodus. When God's people faced the crashing, chaotic Red Sea before them and the Egyptian soldiers chasing them to get their free/forced laborers back. Freedom was blocked. People felt penned in and wondered, “Where is God?” When the sea parted, they had to have the courage to take that first step into the muddy floor now revealing a way where there was once no way.

We are trying to find our way. We are living in a time of upheaval, when the waters of a pandemic, systemic racism, polarization over everything, lack of any kind of unity, fear, anger, certainty that we right, depression, hurt, and ache all clamor of our energy. And that list is what we feel just before breakfast, who knows what is in our emails? We are trying to find our way. The biggest barrier that blocks us is that it is not safe right now to be together. It is not safe to give a hug that preaches a whole sermon. Yet, while we need to social distance, we can still connect.

Call someone today. Zoom or Facetime someone else. Text a third person. Reach out to one another. And as you do, I invite you to say to that person, “(Your name), you are precious in God's sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.” Then, have the person say that back to you.

May that moment be like a lifeline thrown to you offering strength and love in these days.

Prayer: God of words that create worlds, give us strength to reach out and share Your love with others today. Amen.

Morning Meditation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” Isaiah 43:1b-3, 4a

We were sitting by the campfire, sharing stories, roasting marshmallows for s'more, and for a brief moment life seemed a bit less frantic and frazzled. Isaiah draws on two metaphors in this passage. One is water, that we have explored the last few days. The other is fire. Fire, like water, can bring both peacefulness and warmth as well as devastation. We see nightly what is happening up and down along the west coast of our country with the wildfires. We see people weeping at the loss of life and homes. The air quality is impacting people's health. We are witnessing an unprecedented and uncontrollable blaze. And there are moments when just watching a flame dance, in a controlled fire, preaches a sermon about the ways our life dances amid the air currents around us. Fire, like water, is both beautiful and can cause brokenness.

Part of what I find so powerful is Isaiah's invitation to stand on the foundation of God's claim upon our lives. The given and ground on which we stand is God's grace, but as we walk and wonder in this world, we are going to find dangers, toils and snares...to quote one popular hymn. One doesn't negate the other. It isn't that beauty or brokenness is more truer or truthier. One isn't better at defining the world we inhabit. Both exist together.

God in the love and pain. God's presence and feeling overwhelmed. God's hope and a world that is off the rails. Both co-exist. Which is why I keep coming back to Monday's mantra. “(Your name), you are precious in God's sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.” You see, your brain can actually be rewired, things don't have to be the way they have always been. The word you want to Google for this is “neuroplasticity.” We can think new thoughts. We can find new rhythms and routines, even (or perhaps especially?) amid a pandemic and dealing with centuries of racism, and natural devastation. But, we need to be intentional and prayerful. We need to be conscious and not go on auto-pilot. We need to be grounded and guided by a truth that each and every person is precious in God's sight. Then, we need to return to that truth, even when someone says something or does something or hurt creeps into our life unwanted.

What fires are you tending today? Do they overwhelm you or do they warm your soul? Are there both? Notice what burns within you and around you. Name and claim that, just **as you** are named and claimed. And reach out to someone else, to let that person know that you see the waters they are navigating and fires blazing before them. Together, “(Your name), you are precious in God's sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.”

Prayer: Let these words be a balm to my soul and give me courage for today. Amen.

Morning Meditation

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.” Isaiah 43:1b-3, 4a

We have reached the end of another week. I am so grateful to you for reading these meditations. I pray with all my heart that somehow God has moved through the keys of my computer to your screen into your mind to deep in your heart. I pray the mantra this week, “(Your name), you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid,” has helped you and reminded you who and whose you are. I pray that you have held the beautiful tension of both/and of God’s belovedness for you even as we face the waters and fires of such a time as this.

Isaiah gives a benediction or blessing at the end of this verses. You are precious in God’s sight. God loves you. Isaiah is willing to witness to the heartbreak, soul ache, *and* the promise of God’s persistent presence. We struggle to walk that tightrope of the pain and possibility. We can slip to the side of thinking, “This is the worst things ever!!” Or that we can fall toward being Pollyanna or sticking our heads in the sand if. To find ways of talking about and living God’s love alongside the headlines. We have all been culturally conditioned to compartmentalize and categorize into neat, tidy boxes. We have all been taught and told that things are either one way or another.

To put on a new mind, to live a different way, to hold the tension of truths that can both contradict but also be the creative juice for new creation. I am reminded of a great closing line from a Mary Oliver poem, “What are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?” That is a daily practice to answer that question. It is a practice to begin today. How might today be a new day, amid all that is going on around you and within you? How might today start a new chapter? You see, your life is not a script that has been already written, it is an unfolding, evolving, and participatory co-creation with God. To live that way. To every morning remind yourself, “(Your name), you are precious in God’s sight, God knows you fully, loves you unconditionally, and holds you eternally. Do not be afraid.” To face the waters and fires with God firmly as your foundation. May that, my brothers and sisters, be an invitation for all of us in such a time as this.

Prayer: Crafting, creating, renewing, and reminding God, move in our midst with Your truth, grace and love every minute today. Amen.