

On Friday, we centered our morning prayer around these verses from Isaiah 43:

But now, Leah and Rachel and Jacob,
Hear the word of Yahweh the One who created you.
Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name;
you are mine.
You are honored, and I love you.

I'd like us to take a moment to center down upon the relationship of which is spoken in this text. The speaker is a prophet called Isaiah. The prophet is delivering a message, we are told, from Yahweh – “the One who created you.” I think it's safe to say we know who that is. ...

But is it? Is it safe to say we know who Yahweh is?

Again, let's sink into this text. Often, we will blithely throw out the name “God” for this character, who is “out there” and move quickly on; as if we truly know who/what God is.

Let's go with what we've been told:

Yahweh – the one who was revealed to Moses with that designation, which is shifty in and of itself. Could be “I am who I am,” or, “I am what I am,” or, “I will be what I will

be.” It’s a designation, but not a descriptor. With that “name” we know nothing more than that That One, is.

The One who created you – Whoa! That One created me?!? Well, yes and no; hold onto that thought. Because, actually, in this instance the answer is not “you,” the individual. The answer is “y’all,” and specifically the “y’all” of the family that began with Abraham and Sarah. In this instance, the text begins with their grandson Jacob (The Inclusive Bible names his wives, Leah and Rachel, since they were the ones who actually bore the twelve sons who became the tribes of Israel.) It is God who created this community.

I called you by name – After wrestling with an agent of God, Jacob’s name is changed to “Israel.” So, it is significant for Isaiah to mention Jacob, Rachel and Leah, because this name change–“One who strives with God”–signifies the way this community would forever be in relationship with the One that created it.

You are mine – This community is bound by a covenant. This covenant is a promise forged in love and is held together by the understanding that as long as the

community loves This One with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, as well as loving themselves AND their neighbor just as much, then life will be fulfilling. But should the community believe that the lures of life outside of that covenant are too attractive, the covenant will fall out of balance and calamity will befall the community. As our text for today proclaims, God has held the people “on a leash of human kindness – with bonds of caring. ...(But the) people are determined to turn away from (God)!”

I can't help but equate this with my own dogs. There have been times when I have let my dogs run the short distance from our house to the fenced-in backyard when it has been dark. On more than one occasion, said dogs have come sprinting back towards the house reeking of skunk. My brain says, if you've been sprayed once by a critter, the next time I see it I am going to steer clear. My dogs do not think the same way as I, therefore we have a store of hydrogen peroxide, baking soda and Dawn detergent on hand, just in case. When the dogs see The Thing, all they can think about is The Thing, and the repercussions of chasing The Thing don't enter their brain until the tail begins to raise and the consequences hit them right in the face.

As the pet owner, I want to say “Oh, you stupid beast! What were you thinking, and will you ever learn?” But the dog looks at me repentantly while I wash it and my heart melts, and I’m reminded that I love this creature. Indeed, “you are mine.”

The final line of the Isaiah text that I mentioned is *You are honored, and I love you.*

Goodness, that is the interesting thing about the relationship of Yahweh with the people of Israel and Judah. By being in that covenant relationship with the divine they *are* honored. And *WE* having been grafted into the deep abiding love of God through faith in Christ Jesus, we, too, are honored. But with that honor comes responsibility. And the Community of Christ has done about as well with that responsibility as the people of Leah, Rachel, and Jacob. That is to say, at times we’ve lived into the name of God, and at too many others we have blasphemed the name of God, as well as the name of Jesus.

As we talked a bit about during bible study, we people of faith, whether before or after the coming of Christ, have struggled with the *honor* of being in covenant with God. To know that we are being “led with cords of human kindness, with bands of love,” we can often take that for granted; thinking that the mercy of God is a privilege. For if God so loves us, we think there is more and more we can do to test the grace of God,

without consequence. At some point, as we pull against the leash, God tires of holding fast and lets go saying, “Have at it, go get what you think you want; go do what *you* think is best, regardless of what I have told you.” The result is often that we get metaphorically skunked, or so tangled up in our wanton false faiths that we hogtie ourselves and expect God to come and save us, or, worse, leading to calamity as is the case of the people of Israel as we hear in the reading from Hosea.

The prophet frames God’s word as if the divine were a parent rueing over a child who has forsaken them. Despite the love of the Almighty Parent, the people have turned their attention toward other gods, are engaging in violent behavior, and, once again, forgotten who and whose they are. “My people are determined to turn away from me!” Yahweh cries in frustration. And the heartbreak borne of love turns to anger. God is ready to punish them for their waywardness.

Then, something happens: as the Almighty recalls other unfaithful communities that were destroyed, God has a change of heart. God knows that destructive punishment is not the way to help people recall who and whose they are – it just makes them bitter and calcifies their own hearts. “No, no,” the divine one thinks, “I will not leave them to their destruction. I will let them know that I have not abandoned them, and will be with them, no matter what befalls them.”

Indeed, this community would fall. Despite the presence of God, the community's waywardness has led it directly into the path of a stronger empire, The Assyrians, who will come and sack Israel, and force people to flee to safer harbors. And the prophet knows that. The prophet is writing for a later community who would experience a similar fate, and is thus instilling the present community in their own misery with a deeper hope. “Just as God did not forsake *that* community, neither will the Almighty forsake ours,” the prophet intimates.

“In fact, the Strong One will be with us. And will roar like a lion summoning us home.”

“And home we shall go, trembling like doves.”

As I prepare to wrap up this sermon, let's now turn our focus away from The One who delivers the message to those who receive it (and, yes, that includes us).

How many of you read the Chronicles of Narnia? Surely you recall the character of Aslan the lion. This Hosea text made me think of that. If you haven't read the series, it involves a group of siblings living in the first half of Twentieth Century England, who find themselves passing through a wardrobe into a magical land called Narnia. The land was once good but is being ruled by a cold-hearted sovereign. But even more powerful than this human personification of evil is Aslan. Author CS Lewis, an ardent

Christian, characterized this Christ-figure as a lion, who like the other non-humans in the land speak in a voice the children understand. Much like some people feel about the divine one, the lion isn't around all the time, and they sure wish it would be. Over time in the story, the children one by one are introduced to this mysterious figure. At one point, the sisters Susan and Lucy, are introduced to the lion by a hospitable couple, who are beavers. First, Susan inquires:

"Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and no mistake," said Mrs Beaver. "If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's (Sovereign), I tell you."

— C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

Lewis' characterization of the lion for God is spot on. For, returning to Hosea, when the lion roars the people will come home trembling. Trembling for at least two reasons. One, because of the trauma they experienced at the destruction of their culture; and, two, because they have to face the One who calls them, whose love is fierce. And that type of love has some bite to it. As Mrs. Beaver says, "If there's anyone

who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

You get the same feeling in the New Testament, when Jesus is overlooking Jerusalem. The city is representative of another time of oppression – when the Romans occupied the lands of Israel and Judah.

The American prophet Frederick Douglass is famous for having said, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” (1857) He, of course, was speaking directly about the insidious nature of white supremacy in the founding of the United States. People of faith would have to compromise their values if they wanted to be stakeholders in the burgeoning society built on the backs of exploiting the poor, the immigrant, and the captured.

In Jerusalem, Caesar was a demigod and demanded reverence. It was impossible for people to hold power if they would forsake Caesar for the God of their ancestors. And of course the more prophets called religious leaders to account, the more they were silenced. Being under the thumb of an empire will cause anyone to tremble and fracture. Thus Jesus’ lament:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Echoing Yahweh's words in Hosea, "My people are determined to turn away from me."

And yet...

And yet...

And yet, God—whether called Yahweh or the Christ—responds with unmerited mercy:

Jesus says, "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of our God.'"

Of course, that saying occurred during what tradition calls Jesus' "triumphal entry" back into Jerusalem, a week before human brokenness would lead to Jesus' death on the Cross. The crucifixion has many meanings, but in this instance it is once again God relenting from wrathful punishment upon a wayward people in order for them to observe the terror of what their lack of faithfulness is capable of doing, and that God suffers that they may once again be offered the opportunity to repent and to turn back to God.

Israel deserved judgment, but what it got was mercy.

Jerusalem deserved judgment, but what it got was mercy.

Mercy obtained through a God willing to suffer for their sins.

This is Yahweh with Hosea. This is Yahweh with Jesus. This is Yahweh with us.

This God is good, but God is neither tame nor safe. We must constantly be checking our behavior in relationship to the commandments of the God of Love. As Hosea bears witness to the Israelites vis-a-vis the Baals; as Jesus bears witness to the same community as it related to the Roman Empire; it is up to us to pledge allegiance—above any other—to the same God who, through the lens of the crucified and Risen Christ, looks at us as honored and beloved, and yet who also holds us accountable to respond into the world with kindness, justice, and humility.

{Fair, kind, trust God's goodness} children's time

May it be so, driven by the mercy of God. Amen.