

HEBREW SCRIPTURE, Isaiah 43:1-7

(responsively)

*Words of promise and reassurance in a fearful time of transition*

**43** 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.**

<sup>2</sup>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.**

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,  
**the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.**

I give Egypt as your ransom,  
Ethiopia<sup>[a]</sup> and Seba in exchange for you.

<sup>4</sup>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.

<sup>5</sup>Do not fear, **for I am with you;**  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west **I will gather you;**

<sup>6</sup>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—

<sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name,  
**whom I created for my glory,**  
**whom I formed and made.”**

Footnotes: a. Isaiah 43:3 Or *Nubia*; Heb *Cush*

Reader: The Word of the Lord.

People: ***Thanks be to God.***

GOSPEL LESSON, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

*Jesus is baptized by John!*

<sup>3</sup> <sup>15</sup>As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah,<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>16</sup>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<sup>[b]</sup> the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup>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.”

...

<sup>21</sup> 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;<sup>[d]</sup> with you I am well pleased.”<sup>[e]</sup>

<sup>23a</sup> Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.



Four years ago, I put a challenge out to the congregation: let's pray this prayer every day for the whole year of 2015. 23 people took me up on that challenge! I know that some actually managed to pray it just about every day. I admit, my constancy fell off a bit during the summer and I never quite got back to a daily practice after that, but it was still very powerful! And we all had stories to tell about how it changed us and molded us!

For me? This prayer acts as a reset button each time I pray it.

I get my head filled with more things on my "To Do List" than the clock has hours, believing all of them to be of *great* importance! But then I pray, "I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what *You* will, rank me with whom *You* will..."

And with those words gradually becoming a part of me, I began to make better choices about the business that God had before me each day. Not *my* will but God's will. Not *my* business but God's business. Of course, it's a work in progress. But these are powerful words and this is a powerful prayer!

So, I wonder what has happened here this morning.

What is the Holy Spirit accomplishing in our midst?!

"I am no longer my own, but thine." Saying these words and the ones that follow it is a powerful testimony! Words have that power. You know that and I know that!

As children, if we were praised, corrected, encouraged and challenged by important adults in our lives – their words propelled us in the directions we took.

When we internalize words, they can either *bind us* or *set us free*.

Words like the ones we shared this morning are the "set us free" kind as we *bind* our hearts to God! We've shouted out to the universe for God to hear that WE ARE THINE! What joy it must bring to God's heart to hear a gathering of people speak these words!

Each of us understands them differently depending on where we are in our faith journey.

Some of your hearts have been prepared to go to depths with these words this very day.

Some have just said the words and you will take a look later at what it is that you actually said and then decide whether you really meant them.

We are all in different places on our spiritual journeys and this prayer meets us anywhere along our paths to help us out.

I've told you this morning about Alex several years ago and the inspiring two dozen who prayed this prayer for a year, -- and I know of some who continued to this day! -- but at this point I'd like to tell you about a Wesley Covenant Sunday 10 years ago almost to the day.

In 2009, I was preparing a new members class to join the church I was pastoring in Woodbury, Connecticut. Theron was in that class. Theron is a 6'2" father of two boys, a school teacher, and a nationally ranked racewalker. Theron is a deeply spiritual guy who loves God, loves Christ and wants his boys to share that same faith.

But *somehow*, Theron had never been baptized. I can't remember if it had slipped off his parent's "To Do" list or what the reason was, but there you have it!

So, in the new members class where we talked about Baptism, Theron learned that we United Methodists usually perform baptisms in one of three ways: by cupping, by sprinkling, and by full immersion. Bet some of you didn't know that, did you?

Theron decided he wanted full immersion.

Okeedokee! You may not know this about me yet, but I'm always up for a challenge!

So I called up my Orthodox friend, Father Vladimir, and asked him if he had a portable tank I could borrow. He did. We went and got it with a truck. Our caretaker, Michael, kindly filled it with 60 gallons of *warm* water, and into it Theron went -- in the presence of his two young sons, his parents, and the whole congregation. "Theron, I baptize you in the name of the Father (dunk), the Son (dunk), and the Holy Spirit (dunk)."

Do you know *why* he wanted to be dunked?

He said to me that he didn't want to give just the top of his head to God; he wanted to give *his whole self*. "I am no longer my own, but thine." And he wanted the blessing of baptism to quite literally *cover him*.

It was an awesome experience. And it was an experience that involved the whole of him -- mind, heart, and body -- as he spoke those words, "I am no longer my own, but thine." Good job, Theron!

How far into *you* will you let this prayer go?

Remembering Theron's story helped me to *dive* into our Gospel lesson this morning of Jesus' baptism. (pun intended: dive...baptism! ☺)

The day of Jesus' baptism was filled with expectant energy! Throngs of people had been steadily going out into the wilderness to see John and to be baptized by him, renewing *their* vows with God and making *their* stand in faith. To make their *covenant* with God.

And the chatter of the day was whether John might be the Christ. But John says, "No, I don't even compare to him. I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. Just you wait."

They didn't have to wait long! Because those who had gone out on *that* day were there *with* the One of whom John had spoken! *Jesus was there!*

So now can you see him? Fully immersed! *Into* the waters to be washed. *Up* from the waters to be ready to take on the mantel of his ministry. That's the day he made the transition from his former trade -- probably as a carpenter -- to the wandering teacher with a band of disciples. That was the day he made a new covenant with God!

And, as Jesus prayed his covenant, we're told that the Holy Spirit came down on him in bodily form like a dove. And that a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am *well pleased*."

For most of us who were baptized as babies, given to God -- *in covenant* -- and sealed with the Holy Spirit before we could speak for ourselves, we don't usually have a memory of it the way the Bible remembers Jesus' baptism or Theron remembers his.

So we "remember" in other ways -- two of which we are doing here this morning. We renew our vows through the speaking of covenants with God -- that's one way we "remember" this morning.

And the other way is by approaching the baptismal font. Some of you may very well have been baptized with waters from this very font! But if not this one, than another like it, a vessel that holds water for cupping or sprinkling on you little baby head!

The second way we will renew our vows and remember this morning is by approaching this font. Touch the water. Maybe make a sign of the cross on your head? Take a stone to put in your pocket, your purse. Perhaps, stop at the kneeling rail and say a prayer. We will *remember* our

baptism, thanking God for the Holy Spirit in our lives and recommitting ourselves to the path that lies ahead of us as disciples of Christ.

To quote a song from our hymnal: “This is a day of new beginnings; our God is making all things new.” What will you let God make new in you today? A sense of pardon, or full salvation, or some new fresh manifestation of (God’s) graces? – to quote John Wesley? A sense of peace, maybe? A fresh start?

Let the Holy Spirit speak to you now as we come forward to remember our baptisms.

Blessings on the journey. Amen.