



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
January 12, 2025
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Faith is a Plural Word"

Isaiah 43:1-7

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, Cush 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."

Faith is a Plural Word

Theologians often talk about faith as an act of the Spirit rather than a fact of history. For example, if you happen to come across Jesus being baptized by John in the River Jordan, it requires the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the dove, to see it as an act of the Beloved Son, with

whom the Father is well pleased. Without that Spirit, without faith, what you would see, instead, is probably just two guys hanging out in the river.

Take another, less consequential example:

I don't know if you remember what last Monday at 5pm felt like, but it felt disgusting: dry, dark, snowy – yet somehow, everyone in Knoxville was on Kingston Pike or in the stores. I happened to be inside the evil empire that is Hobby Lobby – I don't agree with their politics but I love their crafts – buying bags of small stones for a project at church.

Being the rushed, unprepared man that I am, I didn't bother with a cart or basket. I was just holding three bags full of stones – not even bags, just these mesh pouches – each weighing 2 and a half pounds.

The store was packed. I had my 4-year-old daughter with me; we waited in line to check out for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes. She grew restless; I grew impatient.

To pass the time, and distract my daughter, I gave her one of the three bags of stones to hold, which she loved, until...well, you can guess what happened. She dropped it. The bag broke against the floor. The stones rolled everywhere.

I was actually pretty proud of myself. I think I just sighed loudly, and then recovered, and said, 'uh oh!'

There were women to either side of me, watching this unfold. They were way more prepared, by the way, their things all in carts. And in that moment, thanks be to God, they choose grace instead of judgement. One said, 'oh that happens to me all the time' – which I doubt is true. And then on either side of us, the women in front and behind us, made a game of finding all the scattered rocks with me and my daughter. All of

us picking up, literally hundreds of small stones off the dirty floor together.

The rocks get collected. Three minutes pass.
And then, well, it's my turn to drop a bag. And it also breaks.
Hundreds more stones across the dirty floor.

I sigh. I was less patient with myself than I had been with my daughter. I believe I was not as careful with my language as I should have been.

But again, the people around me, choose grace instead of judgment. 'Uh oh!' one said, giving me time to recover. And again, we made a game, of finding the scattered stones.

Here's what I take from that afternoon. Two lessons:

First, it takes grace to see more than the bare facts of the moment: in this case, a hurried parent with poor judgement having a bad time. My neighbors in that checkout line could have easily just rolled their eyes or pretended they didn't see us. Instead, they chose kindness. Sometimes the Spirit works in unexpected ways.

And second: Sometimes, the Spirit doesn't speak to you, and that's okay. Sometimes, you're too caught up, too busy, too burdened, too angry or in too much pain to see God at work around you. And in those moments, when the Spirit isn't speaking, or we can't hear it, what matters, is that She speaks to those around us. And that can what make the difference.

On a much more profound level, this is why the people of Judea needed Isaiah.

If you happen to have come across the people of Judea, in their historical context at the time of Isaiah 43, you probably would have seen just some conquered people. Nothing really; hardly worth noticing. Seventy years earlier, the Babylonians had decimated their cities and forced the people

into exile. Then the Persians came on the world stage and conquered Babylon, making the people of Judea, what? Babylon's leftovers? The spoils of war? Sure, said Persia, they could return home. What did it matter, to the new empire, who had much more important things to focus on.

You cannot exaggerate how insignificant all this was to the people who mattered, back then. The Judeans were one people among thousands of other subjugated people. Pawns on a chessboard. Servants to superpowers. You cannot exaggerate, how insignificant the people of Judea were made to feel, at the hands of the powerful.

And yet, with the eyes of faith, the Spirit spoke to Isaiah, and said, no. Far from insignificant, far from an afterthought, these people were everything to God – they were God's very own. And this moment in their lives, this chance to return home, far from just happenstance, it was the hand of God upon God's beloved people. It was nothing short of salvation.

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.

We misjudge human nature if we just assume all of Isaiah's original audience felt this way about the road ahead, by the way.

How would you feel? If all you'd ever known, was exile? If you were forced back to a home you'd never even known? The home of that your ancestors lost, the home that was burned to the ground generations ago. Would that feel like salvation? Would you feel much like God's chosen people?

God's chosen people needed prophets, like Isaiah, and they needed each other, to have the eyes of faith, so that they could hear, God's word: *do not be afraid. I am with you.*

This is how faith works, by the way. Too often, we think of faith like it's an individual act. Like its either something you have or you don't have. But in the Bible, faith is carried much more often by communities than it is by individuals. The individuals of the Bible lose faith; they falter all the time. There's more faithlessness than faith in the Bible – Adam and Eve at the fruit; Elijah gave up; Peter denied Christ; Paul persecuted the church – just to name a few.

And your faith also can and will falter, too. Maybe that's the case, even now. If so, that's okay. That's the nature of faith, it ebbs and flows, it rises and falls. What matters, is that we are surrounded by communities of faith that will carry us through in our faltering.

Another striking example: two millennia after Isaiah, and on the other side of the world, Black people were enslaved in this nation. They were told they were less than. They were stripped of their rights, their families, their cultures, their identities. They were treated like things, not people. The despair, captured in slave narratives, is palpable.

And yet, as a community, over and next to this despair, they also found strength, as a community that worshipped out of reach of the slave-master's ears and who knew the words of Scripture. This is especially true for the book of Isaiah. Communities of enslaved peoples did not hear Isaiah as a stale, historical text, the words of ancient people speaking only to ancient people, nor did they believe white people when they said such words of promise did not belong to them.

Instead, they heard in these words a charge that they too, were beloved children of God: *I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.* They heard those words addressed to them in spite of an entire

nation and an economy, run by people who called themselves Christians but did everything they could to deny that very fact.

And so, even in their chains, these enslaved peoples sang spirituals. They held one another up when they faltered. They echoed Isaiah's words to the people of Judea.

They sang, for example, song about 'the old ship of Zion, it will take you home to Glory.'¹

They sang, 'Come out the wilderness / come out the wilderness / come out the wilderness, leaning on the Lord.'

They sang, 'Glory, glory, Hallelujah.'

They sang, 'There is a balm in Gilead.'

They sang, 'Go, tell it on the mountain.'

And they sang these words for generations, for centuries. Even those who knew nothing but slavery. Even those whose parents had been slaves. And their grandparents, and their great-grandparents. And their children. And their grandchildren. When the bare historical fact was nothing but slavery, slavery, and slavery.² As a community of faith, they

¹ I learned of many of these spirituals reading Luke Powery's *Rise Up Shepherd: Advent Reflections on the Spirituals*.

² I'm thinking here of something Ta Nehisi Coates writes in *Between the World and Me*, where he tells his son: I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. "Slavery" is this same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 25-26.

saw more in themselves. They heard Isaiah's words, and they knew, they were they were not just property. They were the beloved of God.

You can hear it, in their songs, they sang of a dignity the white world would never admit.

I can think of no better example, of a faith lived, not just by lone heroic individuals but by a community, that bore one another up. Communities of faith that carried one another. And in turn, through the centuries their songs, their spirituals, their faith has lifted subjugated people. Their songs became the songs of the Civil Rights Movement, and liberation movements all around the world, continuing on to today, continuing in the days, weeks, months and years that will follow.

You see, faith is no individual act. It is done in the plural. By a people much more than a person.

And that is what we remember on this Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

Baptism is never a heroic act of faith carried out by a single individual person. It is rather an act of a community that makes promises to each other.

Any one person's faith – my faith, and your faith – is always a work in progress, growing and sometimes faltering, lifting others up and sometimes needing itself to be picked up. In those moments of faltered, we thank God for the Spirit that speaks to whole communities of faith.

So, if you're coming here to this worship service, and you're feeling it. You are feeling God speak and God move, in your life in and outside the church walls. Then, give thanks be to God. You are called to lift up your neighbor. Do that, so that when the time comes, that you need to be lifted up, when your faith eventually falters. Or when its 5pm on a January evening and you just spilled your rocks all over the floor of a

busy shopping center for a second time. You will have surrounded yourself with a faithful community.

These are the promises that we make to one another in Baptism:

That we will hold one another up.

That we will believe for one another, when others among us have trouble believing.

That we will teach our children the faith.

That we will listen to the direction of the Spirit among us.

Faith and life are too just big and too heavy to be held by just one person sometimes. It takes a community, gathered by the Spirit.

By the way, the craft that I was buying rocks for was for our celebration of Baptism of the Lord Sunday. I was buying these river rocks, to fill the font. For you to take home, and remember the promises we make at the font. Promises to hold and to be held up. Promises to show up in the good days and the hard days.

We are not together today. But the font will be in the center aisle when you come back. When you return, I invite you to take a rock home with you. And remember your Baptism.

Remember God calls not just a person but a people. Remember we are a people who are for and with one another. Just as God is for and with us.

Thanks be to God then. For a faith greater than me, greater than you. So great, it takes a community, to say, *Do not be afraid, God is with you.* Amen.