

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI www.goodshepherdwi.org

“The Gift of Belonging”

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“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you . . . he who formed you . . . : ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine’” (Isaiah 43:1).

It’s a promise of the LORD for his exiles in Babylon. They would be there for seventy years; that is for several generations. Their children and grandchildren would learn to speak the language of the Babylonians without an accent. For seventy years the Jewish exiles would try to hold on to their faith, but it was hard. They were far from their synagogues, far from the temple, far from the religious norms and customs and festivals and expectations of their Jewish brethren back home. They were far from any reminders of their faith, anything that would prompt them to turn their hearts toward Yahweh. They could feel themselves being assimilated into Babylonian culture. After 70 years, surely some of them *thought* of themselves as Babylonians, even as immigrants who moved here seventy years ago think of themselves and their children/grandchildren as Americans. So, after 70 years in Babylon, it didn’t feel like a foreign land anymore. Judah and Jerusalem, however, sure seemed distant and alien. And it got them thinking: could it be God had finally cut them off from the covenant, from his promises, from his mercy? Could it be they were *not* God’s people?

In our text, Yahweh clarifies the issue. “This is what the Lord says, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.” There’s no ambiguity there; not in the Lord’s mind. He removes all doubt, all confusion, all uncertainty: “You are mine!”

Today, for Christians in America, it can sometimes feel like we too are in exile in a foreign land. Sure, we are not captives. We are free and mostly very prosperous. But there’s not much around us anymore that would remind us of who we are, and to whom we belong. There are not many things in our culture that would prompt us to turn our hearts to God. It’s not just about the banishment of prayer in the public schools, or the removal of the nativity scenes. No, it runs much deeper. As Christians, we find ourselves on the outside looking in. In many corners of our culture it’s no longer expected nor even desirable to be a Christian. It’s no longer fashionable. The church has a much smaller stature and role in society. We’ve been told, in effect, to sit down and shut up.

Luther wrote the church sometimes feels like “a handful of people, a fistful of dough, hardly one little biscuit in the whole bakery . . . like [a few] trees in an open field, while the ungodly are packed together like a dense forest. We are a bucket, a little handful, yet that weak smallness is made certain by divine promises” (*AE* 17, 84-85). So, it is today. As Christians, we feel a bit battered by our culture, muted, weak, and small, but our “weak smallness is made certain by divine promises.”

God’s promises to us are sure, including this one. “I have called you by name. You are mine.” It does mean, however, that we need to be careful to stay close to His Word, His Sacraments, and to one another. We need to stay close to God and his church.

It seems so long ago, but before the lockdown I was talking about baptism with the 8th grade confirmands, I had each one of them light a candle from the Christ candle. Then I told them, don’t let it go out. That was easy enough walking around in here, but as soon as we stepped outside, into the gusty wind, one after another, they all went out.

We returned inside, and I told them, “Let’s try that again. Do whatever it takes to keep your candle going.” And on their own the kids gathered closer together, helping each other, using each other to block the wind. When one candle went out, his fire was restored by another. And they stayed close to the church; they didn’t venture too far away. When we got back inside, all candles were burning.

That’s the way of it, isn’t it? That’s the way Christian faith works. Left to ourselves out there, alone, and isolated, we don’t stand much of a chance. Eventually, isolation breeds disbelief, like a small candle in the gusty wind. But when we gather with other Christians, and stay close to them, and help each other, and take

turns blocking the wind, and sharing light; when we stay close to the church, (not so much the building, but the Word and the Sacrament and the communion of saints), then the light of faith keeps burning. When we stay close to the Bride of Christ, we are close also to Christ.

“I have called you by name. You are mine.” When did God call you by name and make you his own? Of course, that happened in Holy Baptism. The pastor said your name out loud, that’s who you are. Then he announced whose you were becoming. “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It’s as if God said, “This one is mine. This one belongs to me. I’ve chosen this one.” After baptism, you know you are a child of God, a member of the body of Christ.

Paul said it this way, “We were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you.’” No, the eye belongs. The hand belongs. There are no throwaway parts around here. You belong!

Because we belong to him, we belong also to each other. He taught us to pray “Our Father . . .” “That must mean we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

You belong, not just to this congregation, but that body of Christians throughout the world. That older woman reading her Bible and praying right now in North Korea, privately, secretly, for fear of her life because of fierce persecution of Christians, she’s your sister in Christ. That infant boy who was baptized in an orthodox church in Russia this morning, he’s your brother in Christ. You belong, not just to this congregation but to that body of Christians all over the earth, and even to those saints of God in heaven. By baptism and faith, you are one of their number. The church is not some sort of ecclesiastical club you choose to join. No, you were gathered into it, called by the Holy Spirit working through Word and water. So, Peter writes, “You are a *chosen* race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, **a people for his own possession**” (1 Pet. 2:9). You belong!

Luther wrote faith is thicker than blood. “For here we have one Baptism, one Christ, one Sacrament, one food, one Gospel, one Faith, one Spirit, one Spiritual body; and each is a member of the other. *No other brotherhood is so closely knit.*” (WLW 275).

Even when you feel most isolated, most lonely, stuck at home, and cut off . . . you still belong. Paul wrote, “For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we **belong** to the Lord” (Rom. 14:7-9).

You belong. You are a member of the Body of Christ, one among the communion of saints, the people of God. Your name is also written in the Lamb’s Book of Life because God decided it belongs there. As our psalm for today says, “It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.”

You belong. You will not be forsaken. You will not be forgotten. He will not cut you off from his promises. You belong. “*But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, he who formed you: ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’*” Thanks be to God. Amen.