

Meditation on Isaiah 43:1-7

January 10, 2016

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

“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 Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia 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.’”

It's great to be back leading worship and preaching again after being gone for 2 Sundays! I missed you! We stayed home for most of my vacation—enjoying walks, movies, eating in local restaurants and going to the beach on New Year's Day! Staying home, it seemed like a “Melvyn the cat vacation” because when we are home, he is always close by! He prefers to be in our laps or standing right in the middle of a book we are trying to read or a board game we want to play. He has been known to try to close Jim's laptop while he is working or push it right out of his lap if he wants Jim's attention.

Melvyn helped us decorate our Christmas tree this year. He did a great job of making sure there was cat hair on the red blanket under the tree. Melvyn's favorite pastime, though, if he isn't sitting in our laps or eating 4 times a day, is sleeping. Sometimes he lounges in a sliver of sunlight on the carpet, but usually, he sleeps on our bed. We always know when he is sleeping because he snores.

Life has changed for Melvyn—and Melvyn has changed, too—since we met him 2 and a half years ago. I was walking out the door of my Minnesota church and there he was in the parking lot. He approached me at a gallop, meowing and sticking his tail in the air. He was dirty. Skinny. Missing some hair. Some scars on his face. I reached down to pet him and he

practically jumped into my arms. He purred loudly, certain that something wonderful was about to happen. Cats living outside in rural Minnesota have a rough existence. Especially in winter!

But it was summer, and I put some food for him on the back steps of our house next door to the church. He ate like he hadn't eaten in a long time. He purred as he ate and paused now and then to rub his face on my leg, as if saying, "Thank you."

I didn't bring him inside right away because we had 2 dogs and worried he might have fleas or worse. He cried all night on the back steps. It was raining. In the morning, when Jim was walking the dogs, I opened the back door. Jim hollered from the yard, "Don't let that thing inside!" He had never had a cat for a pet. He said cats were evil.

Melvyn came inside, and I fed him. He's been with us ever since. He won Jim over during the first week.

It hasn't always been a picnic with Melvyn. Although he learned to use the litter, he often made a huge mess with it. Sometimes, he still does. And he used to get upset whenever Jim and I left the house. We would hear his panicked yowling. He was terrified we wouldn't come back! He would immediately start scrounging for food, even if we fed him right before we left. He would jump up on the counters and kitchen table and on top of the fridge. He didn't care if the food was in a bag or a box. He ate right through plastic and cardboard.

One time we came home on a Saturday night and found that he had stolen a loaf of French bread that we had planned to use for Communion the next day. He had dragged it across the kitchen floor and ate the end off. I was mad! And he did other naughty things—marking his territory in the basement and tipping the dog food container over one day while we were out. All 3 pets had stomach-aches that night.

As the months passed, he began to settle down and be more civilized. He could always win us over, if he were naughty, by being cute and cuddly. He has this habit of curling up on our chests and putting his face right against our faces and going to sleep. Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night and find him staring at me—just a few inches from my face—big dark eyes—willing me to wake up. Or he's plotting to kill me. It's hard to tell, Jim says, with cats. Now he barely opens an eye when we leave the house. He trusts us! We always come back! We always take care of him! Being loved and KNOWING he is loved and precious to us has changed this formally uncouth, utterly selfish creature into, well, a pussycat.

Melvyn's transformation demonstrates only the power of human love. In God's Word today, we learn of the power of God's love for His beloved children—us, though we are, if not utterly selfish and uncouth like Melvyn, still unfaithful to the Lord. But we, even in our imperfect state, are loved, blessed, cared for and guided by the Spirit to live for God's glory—for that is our purpose in life. This is why our Creator created us, as we learn in Isaiah 43:7,

“everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

And yet we cannot fully understand or accept God’s love. Some of us find it hard to believe that we are God’s beloved. If so, why do we suffer in this life? Also, we only know human love, which is flawed and conditional. And we don’t feel loveable, so we imagine that others—even God who loves perfectly and unconditionally—don’t really love us, when they do! I think the key to transformation of hearts and minds begins with an understanding and acceptance of God’s astounding love, revealed to us, over and over again—in the Old Testament and New. When we accept we are God’s beloved children because of God’s Beloved Son, we are released from the burden of our sins that weigh us down. The past doesn’t have to repeat itself! We are people of hope!! We are free to be the amazing people God wants us to be—fully trusting in God’s promises to us!

I truly believe that knowledge and acceptance of God’s love shown through God’s Beloved Son would completely transform our world. But God’s love is as unfathomable today as it was when the author of Isaiah 43 lived— some time between 550 BCE and 515 BCE. God’s people had been living in exile since Babylonian armies attacked and conquered Judah in 586 BCE, destroying the Temple and the Holy City. The captives and exiles dwelling along the banks of the Euphrates River were surrounded by people who worshiped false gods and idols; they were feeling beaten, ashamed, and entirely unlovable. And the prophets speaking during the exile years were saying that God allowed this cruel defeat and their suffering because of their unfaithfulness to Him.

Even Isaiah tells them how unlovable they are in the chapter that precedes today’s reading. You cannot grasp the astonishing message of God’s grace in today’s passage, 43:1-7, unless you know what comes before it. In 42:18-25, Isaiah calls them blind and deaf to God’s presence. He speaks of Israel’s relationship with God in terms of wrath and destruction. “The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness, to magnify his teaching and make it glorious. But this is a people robbed and plundered, all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons; they have become a prey with no one to rescue, a spoil with no one to say, ‘Restore!’ Who among you will give heed to this, who will attend and listen for the time to come? Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So he poured upon him the heat of his anger and the fury of war.”

Isaiah 43 is a soothing balm, beginning with an emphatic disjunctive, “But now...” Whatever follows these words will be in sharp contrast to what came before. And yet the two passages are not contradictory. The God of Isaiah 42 is the same just and righteous God in Isaiah 43, the same God the Lord has always been and will always be. The One who created us for His glory had a plan from the foundation of the world because God knew that human beings would be unfaithful to Him! God’s love for the world led Him to sacrifice His Beloved Son.

The words that follow, “But now” in Isaiah 43 break the silence of exile and despair. They renew the ancient covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They would be reminded of the days of suffering and slavery, when God heard their cry and sent Moses to lead them out of captivity. And finally, with the imagery of God gathering his people from around the globe, we are reminded of Communion, when we experience a glimmer of the heavenly banquet—gathered at the table with Christ in the Kingdom of God.

Friends, God continues to speak to us through Isaiah today! For all of you who struggle to love yourselves and accept God’s astonishing love for you. For all of you who are suffering and wondering if God has abandoned you, like the exiles so long ago. Open your hearts to hear from your Beloved, whose face we will someday see.

“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. ...You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you... 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.’”

Let us pray. Holy One of Israel, thank you for sending your Beloved Son to take our place at the cross—and suffer and die to take our sins away. Thank you for calling us your Beloved and forgiving us, though we are still unfaithful. Help us understand and accept your love for us and to offer that same unconditional love to our neighbors around the world. Lead us to live in obedience to Your Word and to the Glory of your name! In Christ we pray. Amen.