

CHOSEN BY GOD  
Isaiah 43:1-7 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
January 12, 2025

The Good News for us today is outlined in the poem we read in Isaiah; it is confirmed in the gospel text of Jesus' baptism; and it is a declaration to you and me today — And it is this: you are chosen by God—God initiates this action, God sustains the relationship, and God love his creation, his people, and God loves you today.

As we read in Isaiah, God is speaking to the Judeans, currently in bondage in foreign lands, not a message of judgement or threatening disaster, but a message of comfort. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are typical prophetic words of warning, threats of judgement, calls to repentance. But now beginning with chapter 40, it is God's word of comfort. I can hear the aria of the Mesaiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, says your God." How so much do we need to hear that word today. In the first verse of our first reading, Isaiah describes the Lord as the one who created, who redeemed, and who called you "mine." Even though all too often life seems overwhelming, hopeless, dark, and depressing, God calls you into a relationship with Him and promises to be with you through it all. "Be not afraid," we just sang, "I go before you always. Come follow me, and I will give you rest.

I've wanted to preach a sermon on "Be not afraid." for some time now—and especially as we have heard this phrase so often in the stories of Jesus' birth: to Zachariah, to Mary, to the shepherds. Be not afraid!

But let's look at a couple of other passages in the salvation story:

- in Genesis 15:1: God calls to Abram: "*Be not afraid*, Abram, I am a shield to you." And he promised him a son of his own flesh.
- in Genesis 21:17: to Hagar, grieving the near death of her son, God said: "What's the matter with you, Hagar? *Be not afraid*." And God promised her that her son would live and, through him, would be made great nations.
- in Genesis 26:24: he spoke to Isaac, "I am the God of your father Abraham; *Do not afraid*, for I am with you." And God promised to multiply his descendants.

Be not afraid!

Again and again we hear these words. In each scenario we see a divine intervention into a real life situation and a promise of what is to come. It is an initiative taken by God, most often in the form of an angel; it is an announcement of his presence with his people; and it is a revelation of the nature of God's love.

Pair these stories with the gospel text today of Jesus' baptism. We don't hear the actual words "be not afraid", but we do see the same theme of divine initiative, constant presence, and a relationship with a loving God.

It is very significant to pair the two lessons. Both are testaments to the chosenness by God. In Isaiah we read words of assurance to the Judeans that they are a chosen people of God. In Luke's gospel narrative, Jesus is the chosen one—"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:22)

Now comes the Good News: God comes to you today with a promise to be with you in love no matter how difficult your life may be. You are the chosen one. The promise is not to protect you from all difficulties—God knows you are suffering in the midst of floods and fire, quite literally in some parts of our country and the world today, or in the midst of discrimination and institutional racism, or in the midst of arguments, quarrels, and disagreements of one kind or another. "Be not afraid ... I will be with you always" ... blessed are you—loved, cared for, and sustained to the end of time. Again, the Good News is not that we will be spared any and all hardship, but that God is with us in our lives today.

Without going into another whole sermon on baptism, it must be pointed out that that is what our baptism is all about. It is a sacrament, an "outward sign of an inward reality." The priest says at the end of the service: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own for ever." (BCP, p. 308)

We're going to end our worship today singing a Negro spiritual: "Wade in the water. God's a-gonna trouble the water." For me these words are another way of saying: the waters will not always be quiet and calm, but God is going to be there, even to trouble the waters, but for sure to sustain you, to be with you, to love you, and to see it through with you.

AMEN