

"YOU ARE PRECIOUS"
Isaiah 43:1-7 Luke 3:15-22
January 16, 2022
York Center Church of the Brethren
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Are you feeling precious these days? Are you feeling beloved by God? The Covid pandemic has not only taken a toll on our physical health, our mental health has also taken a hit. During lockdowns and times of quarantine people have had more time at home and less outside distractions. Some have been seeing themselves daily on a zoom screen and have spent more time contemplating their body image and life choices. Studies show that 51% of Americans believe the pandemic has contributed to their negative body image. 49% have found their confidence decreasing during the past two years.

Low self esteem is a common malady but that too has increased during the Covid pandemic. Self esteem is the opinion we have of ourselves. Low self esteem is when we are overly critical of ourselves, have negative feelings about ourselves and believe we are not good enough and of no value.

Teenagers are especially vulnerable to low self-esteem and girls tend to suffer from it more than boys. Our self esteem affects how we live our lives. Poor self esteem can lead to poor decisions and even self-harm.

To call someone "precious" means that they are of great value, highly esteemed or cherished. Maybe it is time for a reminder that we are called precious by God.

I love this text from the prophet Isaiah. Hear it again from The Message.

*1-4 But now, God's Message,
the God who made you in the first place, Jacob,
the One who got you started, Israel:
"Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you.
I've called your name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you.
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end—
Because I am God, your personal God,
The Holy of Israel, your Savior.*

I paid a huge price for you:

*all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!
That's how much you mean to me!*

*You are precious to me!
That's how much I love you!
I'd sell off the whole world to get you back,
trade the creation just for you.*

*5-7 "So don't be afraid: I'm with you.
I'll round up all your scattered children,
pull them in from east and west.
I'll send orders north and south:
'Send them back.
Return my sons from distant lands,
my daughters from faraway places.
I want them back, every last one who bears my name,
every man, woman, and child
Whom I created for my glory,
yes, personally formed and made each one.'"*

That sounds pretty good to me as we continue to live in these uncertain times. Now imagine that you are hearing these words while bloodied, bruised, and beleaguered, living in exile, basically a prisoner in Babylon, the nation of your enemy. You have been dragged from your home by the conquering army.

Since the defeat of your nation all you have been hearing from God's prophets are words of judgment, because, you have to admit, you really screwed up. The people of God tore their covenant with God into tiny pieces. They mistreated the poor, tolerated corruption in the Temple, and turned their backs on the God who speaks their name. In the words of theologian Claus Westermann, you are a *"tiny, miserable, and insignificant band of uprooted men and women standing on the margins of a hostile empire."*

You are a broken and hopeless people *"living between a dead past and a future not yet born."* (Eric Hobsbawm) You barely even remember your own name, let alone your identity. You no longer know who you are or whose you are. And then, suddenly, into the bleak silence of exile and despair comes the word of God through the prophet.

"Don't be afraid. I have redeemed you. I have called your name. You are mine."

Here is the voice of God, calling to YOU. Here is God's promise of wholeness; God's promise of a future spoken to people who messed up; people who gave into evil; people who didn't really deserve another chance. These are the people who hear that they are precious, valued, and honored by God. They have not been forgotten.

Can you imagine what that felt like? It isn't over, as we thought. We still belong to God. God's words of comfort and forgiveness are greater than our sin and defeat. We get another chance.

This is a remarkable message to an undeserving people. And it says more about God than it does about the people. God never gives up on us. That is grace.

In his book, GOD HAS A DREAM, the late Desmond Tutu wrote, "Dear Child of God, in our world it is often hard to remember that God loves you just as you are. God loves you not because you are good. No, God loves you, period. God loves us not because we are lovable. No, we are lovable precisely because God loves us. It is marvelous when you come to understand that you are accepted for who you are, apart from any achievement. It is so liberating.

We too often feel that God's love for us is conditional like our love is for others. We have made God in our image rather than seeing ourselves in God's image. We have belittled God's love and turned our lives into an endless attempt to prove our worth.

There is nothing you can do to make God love you more, for God already loves you perfectly and totally. But more wonderfully, there is nothing you can do to make God love you less- absolutely nothing, for God already loves you and will love you forever." (1)

This is a remarkable message to us even today. We just spent several weeks preparing for and celebrating the arrival of baby Jesus, God in human form-- a gift we neither asked for nor deserved. That is grace. We have left the manger behind and now we find Jesus as an adult, standing on the banks of the Jordan River. Our text from the Gospel of Luke is an important one about identity- Jesus's, God's and ours.

We begin with John the Prophet who was preaching, baptizing, and gathering disciples. People were so impressed with him that they began to ask if he was actually the messiah they were waiting for. You can see how they would think that. John was raising a ruckus, speaking out against the evil in the world; challenging the religious and civil authorities; demanding that the people say they are sorry for all the wrong they have done and turn back to God. He was speaking truth to power in a way they had not heard for a very long time. They were hoping that maybe their long wait was over. Maybe this was the one who came to set them free.

John knew who he was and who he wasn't. He was very clear about his identity. He knew his role and his limitations. His job was to prepare the way for the One who was more powerful than he. His job was important, but he didn't claim to be more than he was. "You think **I'm** something," he told them. "Just wait until you see who is coming. I am nothing compared to him."

Now we come to an interesting interlude in verse 18. Herod Antipas intrudes on our story. He was the son of Herod the Great who terrorized Palestine when Jesus was a baby. John announced that Herod the son was an evil king just like his dad. John criticized him for having an affair with his siter-in-law. Herod was so angry that he threw John in prison.

We know that the Gospel writers weren't interested in chronological accuracy. So we don't know if John was imprisoned before Jesus showed up at the river or if this is just a reminder of what happened in the future. But if John was in prison then we have to ask, Who baptized Jesus?

Surprised? The Gospels of Matthew and Mark are very clear that Jesus was baptized by John, his cousin. And the Gospel of John implies it. But Luke isn't so clear. What this tells us is that, for Luke, the most important part of this story is that Jesus was baptized, not who did the baptizing. In this way Luke moves the spotlight from John to Jesus. Luke tells us that Jesus lined up with everyone else and was baptized just like they were.

Luke's attention is on what happened after Jesus came up out of the water. The first thing he did was to pray. Jesus prays a lot in Luke's Gospel. While he was praying something amazing happened. The heavens opened, the Holy Spirit came down like a dove and landed on him, and a voice came from heaven. The voice spoke only to Jesus and said, "*You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.*"

God's affirmation of Jesus is powerful, joyful and empowering.

In that moment God confirmed Jesus's identity as the Messiah, the One through whom God is acting in history. It is a life changing moment for Jesus. As all heaven breaks lose his identity is confirmed and his ministry begins. These words of affirmation will sustain Jesus throughout the joys and the sorrows of his ministry.

Not only is the identity of Jesus revealed, but through him we also see the identity of God. One theologian writes, "*If Jesus the Messiah is the one in whom God has chosen to dwell and reveal God's self, then we can know God through Jesus. Through Jesus we know that God loves the physical and material world. The God we know in and through Jesus is the God of history and is an active agent in history.*"

This God shares the messiness of humanity and suffers with humanity in order to bring redemption and salvation. Through the prism of Jesus we see the brilliance of a God whose power shines through love and persuasion and not through coercion.

In Jesus the Messiah we know of a God who has taken the form of weakness in order to confound the mighty and strong of this world. God, in Jesus, the Son of God, is at work through the Spirit, raising new voices, empowering people, and nurturing their hopes. The God we know in Jesus is a God of a new tomorrow whose power is already at work in the world, and faithfully born in Jesus. (2)

This is the God who calls us, claims us, knows us, and loves us. What we learn through the prophet Isaiah and through Jesus is that our relationship with God is one we cannot destroy. We can neglect it, deny it, run away from it, ignore it, but we cannot destroy it because God loves us too deeply and too completely to ever let us go.

The words Jesus heard at his baptism are also the words we hear, "You are my son. You are my daughter. You are my beloved. You are precious to me. With you I am well pleased. These are life-giving, life-changing words that every human being should hear. And I believe it is one reason why we gather for worship.

Much of our experience in the world demeans our identity, makes us question who we are, makes us forget our own name and where we belong. We gather as a family of faith, week after week to help us remember, to affirm one another, to be challenged to claim our identity as God's precious child. In worship we remind each other of **who** we are and **whose** we are. It is in this place that we share our hopes and dreams; our fears, our sorrows, and even our doubts. It is here that we celebrate and use our gifts; and do all we can to make this world a better place.

When our own self esteem is sinking and we aren't sure who we are or where we belong our brothers and sisters in faith will speak our name, call us beloved, and remind us that we are precious.

I came across this blessing a few days ago- I offer it to you, written by Reverend Anna Blaedel.

Darling one-

You precious mess-

You exhausted, grieving, hollowed, hallowed, hallelujah of a human-

Today, if even for a moment, may you feel:

Your own beating heart

Your own courageous soul

Your chest rising and falling with breath

Which is spirit

Which is lifeforce

Keeping pulse

Marking time

Finding space-

Regardless of how you are feeling

No matter what you are capable of

Or not-

And, for just a moment

May you find rest

A bit of ease, held

In that sacred rhythm

That cannot be without you

Because you, you precious mess,

Have breath and heart and lifeforce

Pulsing through you, yet.

You are God's precious, beloved child.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

End Notes:

- *GOD HAS A DREAM: A VISION OF HOPE FOR OUR TIME*, Desmond Tutu, Image Books. 2004. Pp.31- 32.
- *FEASTING ON THE GOSPELS*, "Theological perspective," by Eleazor S. Fernandez. Westminster John Know press. P. 82.