

1 Epiphany – Year C – January 13, 2010 - Homily
Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
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Some years ago, when we were on vacation in Hawaii I had an experience of what Isaiah calls, passing through the waters. The beaches of Hawaii are famous for surfing, and the waves can be anything from gentle swells to huge breakers. This particular day, the surf was up. The beach was gorgeous, and the water tempting. So I went into the waves, just at the edge about waist height. What happened next was a total surprise. I can swim, so I hadn't given much thought to the tremendous power and force of the ocean, or to the prevailing undertow. Even though I was trying to stay only about waist height in the water, as each wave broke, I kept being pushed over, and dragged under. No sooner had I got to my feet again when the next wave broke and knocked me over. I was beginning to get tired and out of breathe from the repeated pummeling of the waves. There were probably fifty people within twenty or thirty feet of where I was struggling, and yet only Steve noticed that I was getting into trouble. Much to my relief he ran over and pulled me out. What I thought was going to be a pleasant dip in the ocean, turned into a frightening experience.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah twice tells us, "Do not fear". Yet the Israelites had plenty of reason to be fearful. This portion of Isaiah was written to those swept away into exile by the tidal wave of the Babylonian army. The people interpreted their exile as sanctioned by God because of their unfaithfulness. This portion of second Isaiah is directly linked to the descriptions of God's judgment and wrath found in the earlier chapters. God's judgment is also a part of God's mercy, and so we find in this portion of the prophet's message words of God's grace and love. As we will see, this passage contains an amazing confession of God's radical and unconditional love like a pearl nestled in the center of an oyster, as well as God's promise of redemption and a new beginning. As Christians, we see in this passage God's new beginning in Christ's coming into the world, as well as our own redemption in Christ, our Lord and savior.

The first sentence tell us that God is our creator, and our redeemer: "Now thus says the Lord, he who created you... Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Despite all circumstances and appearances to the contrary, we are immediately reassured of God's providential care, **and** something else. These words are not spoken as if all of creation were some kind of object, or toy for the amusement of a somewhat disinterested or transcendent deity. They are spoken in a way that reminds us of God's intimate relationship to all of creation, and especially with God's children. The fact of creation poses an interesting theological puzzle. God is and always has been complete in and of God's self. God does not need anything or anyone. God's perfection is found in the relationships of the three members of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has never needed any part of creation, including humanity. In our faith tradition, we have come to understand that God's creation is simply an outpouring of God's love and grace, and as Isaiah tells us, we are "created for [God's] glory". At the heart of the matter, we are created in God's image and that means that God may not need us, but God desires to be in intimate relationship with us because, as God says, "you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Fundamental to every human being is the need to know that we are loved. God offers

us unconditional and eternal love in Christ. God's love is incomparable. We can know love amongst ourselves, as a parent or grandparent, with an intimate partner, or as the love between friends, but God's love is matchless in its perfection, and in its power to change us. The alpha and omega of God's love for all creation, including humanity, is expressed in the link between God's initial gift of creation and God's final act of redemption. A fundamental characteristic of God is as life-giver and life-sustainer. Both the acts of creation and redemption are characteristic of God's creativity and Life with a capital "L". God overflows with love in the act of creation, and never abandons us. God moves outward again in the act of redemption, as a gift of re-creation and new life. The repetition of the "I" statements reminds us that God calls God's self, I AM. "I have redeemed you." "I will be with you." "I am the Lord your God." "I will bring... I will gather... I will say." "I love you."

In Isaiah, we hear God reaffirmation of His desire to draw us back into right relationship, with words that also tell us that God never left any of us. The human condition is such that you and I often miss the mark, and need to be reminded to repent and return to the Lord. Our reconciliation with God includes a right understanding of God as God, and you and I as God's fallible and sinful creatures. Truly understanding the power, glory and absolute sovereignty of God, which is always expressed with perfect love, justice and mercy towards God's creation, helps us in our righteous response. That response is to worship God; offer our gratitude, love and service; as well as our humble obedience to God's will. Being who we are -- independently minded creatures capable of rational thought and prone to easy rationalizations -- we tend to forget who we really are. Israel too had drifted away from God, and had fallen into judgment. Isaiah was sent to tell the people how much God loves them and cares for them. In God's ultimate act of re-creation and renewal, we celebrate Jesus, God incarnate, who comes to show the whole world how much God loves us.

This week we celebrate Jesus' baptism, and remember our own baptismal covenant. The images of water and fire used in Isaiah continue to resound with meaning in the life of every Christian as well. John tells us that Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and fire. Isaiah promises that water and fire will not overwhelm or consume us, but that God will be with us always. Water and fire are symbols of purification, just as the waters of our baptism cleanse us from our sins, and the fire of the Holy Spirit sanctifies us for our new life in Christ. The waters of baptism and the fire of the Holy Spirit help us to grow into our new identity as children of God. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection reveal God's absolute and unconditional love for all people. Jesus is God's gift of salvation for the life of the world. As we move forward in the season after Epiphany, God continues to invite us all to reflect on His love and care in our own lives, as well as to share the light of life in Christ with others. All for the glory of God, "Because you are precious in my sight," says the Lord, "and honored, and I love you."

Amen.