

Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Get out a pen or pencil or use the one in the pew rack. We are going to do a grammar exercise. Now take your bulletin and let's look closely at the first reading, the one from Isaiah. But before we begin, let me give you a context for this passage.

God's people are in exile. They have been conquered by Babylon and Jerusalem has been destroyed – burned to the ground. Many people have been killed and many have been forced to walk close to 900 miles to Babylon. It was common in the ancient world for a conquering army to force those it had defeated into exile. Exile served to remove the ruling class so that they couldn't regroup and retaliate. It broke their spirit. Add to that the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – the place where God made his home – and you might imagine the utter desolation and dislocation and despair that God's people are experiencing.

Just before this passage begins, at the end of chapter 42, God lets the people of Israel know that they have sinned, that it was their idolatry and disobedience that has brought God's wrath down on them.

But now we have this song of promise, and in order to get deep inside it, we are going to look at the verbs. Now if it has been a while since you had a grammar lesson, let's review: What is a verb? It's a word where the action takes place in a sentence. Verbs have a subject, the person or thing doing the acting. And often, verbs have an object, the person or thing being acted upon.

So...let's begin by circling all the verbs in the first verse:

Created. Formed. Fear. Redeemed. Called by name.

Who is doing the action in these sentences? It's God, the Lord. And who is the object, the acted-upon? Israel and Jacob, by which the author means the people of God. And what verb does God tell God's people to do, or more specifically, not to do? Fear. Do not fear, says God to the people. Why? What might there be to fear?

Let's go on to verse 2. What are the verbs in this verse?

Pass [through the waters] and then in the line following, we assume that the verb "pass" also means through the rivers.

Overwhelm. Walk [through fire.]

Who is doing the passing through the water and the walking through fire? You are, people of God. And notice – it's not "if" you pass through the waters or "if" you walk through the fires, but "when." These images of suffering, of ordeal, are pretty much guaranteed. Every single one of us will have to pass through water and walk through fire at some point in our lives. Maybe not literally. But there will be an ordeal, and you don't get to avoid it.

But there are some other verbs in this verse. What will happen when you pass through the waters? I will be with you. Who is the "I"? God. What is rest of the promise that God makes? What verb will happen when you pass through the rivers? They shall not "overwhelm" you. And what about the fire? – the verbs are "burned" and "consumed." You will not be burned or consumed. Who can make that kind of promise? That you won't even be touched by the flames; that you won't be pulled under the current?

The answer is right there in the next verse: three names for God: 1. The Lord your God; 2. The Holy One of Israel; 3. Your Savior. God is the One who is holy. God is the one to whom you belong. God is the great I AM, the One who is the source of all being.

What more does God the great I AM do? Let's keep on going through the verbs. "Give" is next. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. And just a little further, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Think of ransom that families pay when someone is kidnapped. Think of a prisoner exchange or a spy exchange. When ransom is paid and exchanges are made, something of value changes hands. God trades for you. God redeems you. God makes a payment in return for you.

Why does God do this? The answer right there in verse 4. It is the very heart of this entire passage: Because you are precious in my sight, says God. You are honored and I love you. Listen to the verbs: You are precious. You are honored. I love you.

What other God ever makes this claim? What other God wants that kind of relationship with us, beautiful and crazy and wandering and disobedient people that we are? Most other gods in human civilization want nothing to do with people. Most other gods in human civilization are to be feared and placated. Most other gods in human civilization think of people as mere playthings for their entertainment, if they think of people at all. Not this God. Not our God. God created you. God formed you. God honors you. God thinks of you as precious. God calls you by name. God desires to know you and God desires that you know God. It is a relationship of love and intimacy.

That is what baptism is all about. That is what Jesus' baptism was all about. Heaven opening up. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove landing on Jesus. God's voice speaking aloud: "My Son, the Beloved. With you I am well pleased." This is God's claim, that came to you in your own baptism as well: "You are a child of God. You have been

sealed with the Holy Spirit. You have been marked with the cross of Christ. Forever.”

You are precious in God’s sight, and honored and God loves you.

This does not mean that we do not have work to do. Baptism comes at a price – the price of surrendering your old self to be reborn and walk in this new life. It means living into your baptism every single day. We must, as Paul says, consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Walking in this new life means returning to the baptismal promise over and over again. It means dying daily to sin.

In just a moment we are going to affirm our baptisms, with the very same questions that were asked of you, the very same words spoken over you on the day of your baptism.

I am going to ask you to renounce evil. I am going to ask you to confess your faith in the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And I am going to ask you to re-commit yourself to the promises that were promised on the day you were baptized. To live among God’s faithful people. To hear the Word of God. To share in the Lord’s Supper. To proclaim God’s good news in everything you say and everything you do. To serve others as Jesus did. To work for justice and peace. Do you hear all those verbs? Renounce. Believe. Live. Hear. Share. Proclaim. Serve. Work. Action words.

And then, when you come forward to receive Christ’s body and blood, I’m going to give you something else, a token of your baptism, to take home and put somewhere special to remember, or carry with you and remember. Because baptism is also about action. It’s God’s action that we receive, and our actions that we live by. Martin Luther suggested that every morning as we wash our faces, we remember our baptism and rededicate our lives to living out the promise of salvation that we have received.

Created. Formed. Redeemed. Called by name. Ransomed. Exchanged. Loved.

This life, this baptismal life, means action.

God's action, which we receive. Our action, by which we live.