

Given Up and Not Withheld

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the LORD,
the one who created you, O Jacob,
the one 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. 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."

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Isaiah 43:1-7

January 9, 2022

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I.

Today's sermon is one which actually could take all of about 3 minutes preach, but it won't. Today's sermon is also one which really should be spread out over 4 to 6 weeks, but it certainly doesn't need to. Then, again, the central topic of today's sermon is one which a great many pastors preach on every single Sunday *ad nauseam*. Therefore, the goal of today's sermon is to find the "sweet spot."

This morning, I would like to explain to you why we are *not* "saved" by confessing our sins, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and inviting him into our hearts. To do so, we will highlight a turn-of-the-last-century Baptist minister, reference race relations in our nation, examine the doctrine of Original Sin and, finally, explore what it means to have a "reasoned" faith. Welcome to a new year at the Church on the Park.

II.

Clarence Herbert Woolston was a pastor, gospel songwriter and, interestingly, sleight-of-hand magician. Born in 1856 in Camden, New Jersey, Woolston crossed the Delaware River to attend Crozier Theological Seminary in Upland, PA; just outside Philadelphia. Ordained as an American Baptist minister, Woolston first served short pastorates in small churches in South River and Lambertville New Jersey, then, concluded his career with a 40 year stay at East Side Baptist Church in Philadelphia (which starts to sound eerily familiar). Upon his death in 1927, Woolston's obituary notes that he was known as "a pastor-magician because of his use of sleight-of-hand to demonstrate features of his sermons with which he wished particularly to impress his congregation." Though all of this may be news to you, the truth is most of us are quite familiar with at least some of his work, as the Rev. Woolston was the author of the very familiar hymn, "Jesus Loves The Little Children."

III.

*Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world;
Red and yellow, black and white,
All are precious in his sight,
Jesus loves the little children of the world.*

Though to our ears, this overly-familiar refrain might strike us as sweet and quaint, I can assure you that in his day it was quite bold and, perhaps, even a little risky. Amazingly, even though millions of Christians have sung this simple song for over a century now, the straightforward message it attempts to convey is still lost on most; as it is simply too vast a concept to fully and finally comprehend. Take a look at any hymnal in which the song is contained and it will cite Matthew 19:14 as the scriptural source, with Jesus saying, “Let the children come unto me and suffer them not, for to such as these the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

IV.

Remember, though, Woolston was known as a “pastor-magician.” His greatest sleight-of-hand was to convince millions of believers that it is in the sight of *Jesus* that the children are precious. However, what we discover in today’s text from Isaiah 43 is that the understanding of being precious in one’s sight is attributable not to the Jesus of the New Testament, but to the God of Israel in the Old.

Putting aside the notion of the Trinity for a moment (and it is, admittedly, a big aside) this is an very important distinction as it reveals a movement, a direction, a trending of one thing to another. We all like to imagine Jesus taking a knee in the midst of a gaggle of kids and welcoming them into his arms. We understand it as symbol for the love Christ has for us in being taken up on the cross that we might be welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven as the children of God: red, yellow, black and white, we are precious in his sight.

V.

It is here, though, in Isaiah, and *not* in the Gospels, that the notion of being precious in one’s sight is first conceived and expressed. The book of Isaiah, as a whole, offers a prophetic hope to the nation of Israel languishing in exile in Babylon. No where is such a hope more beautifully expressed than, here, in the 43rd chapter written by the author referred to by biblical scholars as

“Deutero-Isaiah” or the second Isaiah (with the first 39 chapters being attributed to “Proto Isaiah,” 40-55 to “Deutero-Isaiah, and chapters 56-66 to “Trito-Isaiah”).

“Do not fear,” says our Creator, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, *you* are mine. 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.’” Why? God says to us, “Because you are precious in my sight.”

VI.

Then, the passage concludes with these remarkable words: “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.” Isaiah 43:1-7 is the pod which contains the seeds of redemption planted by Jesus in his earthly ministry, find full bloom on the cross of Christ, and bear the fruit of God’s salvific action to all the world in every age.

Today’s passage is but one chapter in the timeless promise of hope offered first to a few, then to a family, and then to a people, and then to a nation, and then to all the nations and will, finally, find its way to every corner of the cosmos; to be taken in, and taken up, by all things and every person. It is a redemption brought by the very hand of God, who will abide no other outcome less than the *entire* creation being given up to God, and not withheld from *any*.

VII.

As I do each week after selecting the biblical text, deciding on a sermon title, and picking the Call to Worship and Prayer of Confession, I went to the “Church Art” website (to which we pay a modest fee) to select an image to include on the week’s bulletin cover. The results of my search quickly yielded the graphic you see today, which perfectly captures the sentiment I hoped to convey in this week’s sermon as the caption quotes Isaiah 43:4, “You are precious in my sight.”

I quickly downloaded the image, copied and pasted it into the bulletin, and resized it to fit. Frankly, until that point, I really didn’t even noticed that it just happened to be an African-American baby. Once I did, however, it gave

me pause. I thought to myself, “Huh? I wonder if there is the same graphic with the image of a caucasian baby as well? (They sometimes use different images within the same theme.)

VIII.

In my tumble of thoughts which ensued, I quickly questioned if I would choose to use the one more accurately matched to our congregation’s very white demographic? Though it might be justifiably more apt, I just could not see me actually, and intentionally, making such change. Not that it really would matter; but, at the same time, I think you would all agree it matters very much in terms of the rationale which was brought to bear in deciding.

Would I stick with the *black* baby, considering myself a enlightened, progressive, woke person and pastor? Or, would I chose to use the *white* baby, considering myself so enlightened, progressive and woke as to not feel the need to bow down to or be wary of the whims and trappings of cancel culture? As I returned to the Church Art website, I thought no way they have the same graphic, one with a black baby, another with a white. That would simply be too sharp of a stick for all the reasons over which I had just been ruminating. Mercifully, there was just the one graphic.

IX.

For as brief as it was, however, the experience caused me to fall down a rather tumultuous rabbit hole about race relations in our nation, and the form of what can be considered my own innate racism. I don’t think any of us here would consider ourselves racist, *per se*. I think you would join me, however, in admitting each of us differentiates. We differentiate everything, all the time, with few things coming more easily than the recognition of the difference between black and white.

Of course, there are any number of ways to parse this, and slice the baloney even thinner. For me, as a theologian, matters of race, and all forms of bias, bigotry, racism, sexism and extremism (etc!) all boil down to the same one thing: the differentiation of those *like us* from those who we perceive to be *unlike us*. And this need, this irrepressible human tendency to separate “us” from “them” is as insidious as it is common.

X.

As it happens, such a tendency has a name: Sin. Thousands of years of human inquiry and Scriptural study, not to mention rampant and irrepressible popular culture, will tell you the first sin was that of disobedience. God told Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; but, they disobeyed and, so, were cast out of the Garden of Eden. This begs the question, however, of *why* they sought to disobey in the *first* place?

We are told the serpent, that craftiest of all the creatures, tricked them; saying, if they ate of the fruit they would be *like* God, knowing good and evil. Yes, they disobeyed and ate of the fruit, but this was the *second* sin. The *Original* sin, was allowing themselves to be fooled into thinking they were *unlike* God; they came to differentiate themselves as somehow separate and apart from God. That they were “us,” and God was “them.”

XI.

From that point on, the story unfolded much as you would expect, and as we have all seen: one group on one side of the mountain, river or valley understanding themselves to be different, that is better, than the other group on the other side of the mountain, river or valley. Add to this the need to survive amid limited resources, the fear behind the thirst for power, and the relentless grind of greed to always be seeking more, and pretty soon spears are sharpened, swords forged, cannon balls cast, guns greased, bombs loaded and missiles aimed. Sooner or later, they get used; and to great effect. Lands are seized, belongings looted, chains affixed, oppression wielded, opposition eliminated, and tyranny reigns. All because we've come to decide that the only ones who are precious in *our* sight are those who look, live and believe like *us*.

XII.

It is a slippery slope, though, isn't it? It doesn't take long for “us” to run out of “thems”; so, eventually, some of “us” turn into more of “them” and we do the whole dance again, and again, and again. Regardless of if we realize it or not, the Original Sin of differentiation is at work in everything we do in some form or another; that's the bad news. The fundamental nature of human existence is set and cannot be changed from within.

The good news is, all of this is at work in us in varying degrees and to various effect; meaning, we have a certain latitude in making the bad worse, or the good better. Moreover, it doesn't take very much good to make things a whole lot better. It doesn't take armies or armaments, it is simply a matter of "us" seeing "them" with some degree of the preciousness which God sees all of us; red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight. We just need to stop differentiating, all the time, in our families, our communities, our nation and our world.

XIII.

While it is true this little trick being taught is applicable in every area of human existence and endeavor, I'd like to end today by focusing on the responsibility which is uniquely ours, as Christians. That is, in broadening our understanding of salvation; who is saved and who is not. At the church in which I was raised, the *only* way a person was saved was by confessing their sins, accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and inviting him into their hearts. When you did so, you became an "us" and left behind all of "them" who were forever damned to hell (not to put too fine a point on it). It took me a great many years, with some very deep thinking and some awfully hard lessons, to realize that this was yet, and merely, another instance of differentiation. Paradoxically, that very same church was forever emphasizing the power of God's grace; but only if we first accepted it. As if we had it in *our* power to dictate or limit *God's* grace.

XIV.

Sadly, that church is not alone in such a theology. For 2000 years Christians have heralded the profundity and magnanimity of God's grace, then busily got to work to limit that very grace. In so doing, they fail to recognize and accept that God doesn't play by our rules, as God has always sought to save: first a few, then a family, a people, a nation, all the nations and, finally, every corner of the cosmos. In the sight of God, *all* are precious, red, yellow, black and white; those who welcome Jesus into their hearts and those who do not; those we perceive to be *like* us, and those we differentiate to be *unlike us*. Certainly, this is too vast a concept to fully and finally comprehend; but, should we expect anything less from God?

XV.

When we speak of having a “Reasoned Faith” we refer to the melding of mind and spirit, of science and belief, of provable and knowable. Yet, we must also employ a *reasonableness* in recognizing the movement, the direction, the trending of salvation in ever widening circles to include all of God’s sons from far away, and each of God’s daughters from the end of the earth; everyone who God calls by name, whom God created for God’s own glory, whom God formed and made. The promise of hope found in Isaiah 43 is for *all* God’s children: “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 *all* are precious in God’s sight; and, eventually, in some way and on one day, *all* will be given up and not withheld.

XVI.

That would have been the end of this rather long sermon; but, mercifully, well short of 4 to 6 weeks. Really, though, everything I’ve said can be understood in just 3 minutes. Because that is about how long I stared at the photo I received Tuesday from Jarrett and Marion, which I share here with their permission. Meet Rosie, on her first day in this world, so precious in our sight. More reassuringly, we absolutely believe that she has been found precious in the sight of God; and that is the sweetest spot of all in which to find oneself. AMEN!

