

Isaiah 43: 1-7 & Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 Prompted by Prayer

Isaiah 43: 1-7

But now thus says the Lord,
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have called you by name, you are mine.
 2 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.
 3 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.
 4 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.
 5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
 I will bring your offspring from the east,
 and from the west I will gather you;
 6 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—
 7 everyone who is called by my name,
 whom I created for my glory,
 whom I formed and made.’

Through the prophet, God spoke these words of comfort, assurance, and of God’s ardent love for them when the people of Israel needed to hear it the most, and when they needed to hear it again. They were living in exile, again, under a foreign rule, again, this time in Babylon, thanks to their leaders who made bad choices, again. As a people, they had been scattered; as a nation, their identity had been stripped away. From what they were experiencing, their future was in doubt, and they were fearful. God appeared to have abandoned them.

But to them, God said, “Remember, I’m the one who made you. I brought you into being; you are my sons and daughters. Surely, I will not forget about you; I am your Savior. I am bringing you back, all of you, no matter the cost.

This is God coming to God’s people from the depth of God’s love for them, brimming with mercy, more than ready to save them. When the people thought they had hit their bottom,

God's strong arm reached down deeper still to scoop them up, saying, "you are mine, you're precious and I won't lose you to anyone or to anything."

God tells Israelites, when the water and the river, the fire and the flame threaten you, do not be afraid, for I will be with you, and you will not be harmed. Here, God speaks of water and fire as destructive elemental forces that threaten us, but the Scriptures remind us, God was the One who parted the water of the Red Sea so Israelites could escape the Egyptians who pursued them, and God was with them in the pillars of fire and smoke, guiding them by day and by night, once they were out in the wilderness.

God commands even the elements that threaten us and promises to be with us and protect us. These enduring words of God Prophet Isaiah brought to the Israelites speak to us today through the Scriptures. God has done it, and God is doing it, and God will do it again, for God keeps God's promise; we can rest in the faithfulness and trustworthiness of our Covenant God.

And yet, we know all too well the devastating power of water. We have too many memories that are still fresh. Whether as hurricanes or storms or tsunamis, mighty waters bring great destruction, taking much from us. And fire? The fires, I mean. We have just seen the homes and cars and entire neighborhoods in the greater Los Angeles burn to the ground, and so many people have lost everything, and sadly, it is not over yet.

These losses are real; even if all one could feel in the face of such loss is numbness. The pain is real, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and perhaps for many, spiritually, too. When the river has overwhelmed and the flames have consumed much of what was dear to you, where is God with God's promise to protect us?

Some people might say, "oh, water and fire, the river and the flame, they're just metaphors, mere symbolic images." Well, metaphors and symbolic images reflect our lived experience; their truth is not diminished. So, I would ask them this: if not the actual water and fire, tell me what is the river that is overwhelming your life right now? If not the real fire, what is the flame that is consuming you? From what abyss of your life, with what pain, do you long for your Savior, the One who will be with you and protect you.

It was with such longing for a Savior in their hearts, the people were flocking to John by the Jordan River, when Jesus, too, came to be baptized. Hear now, the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Luke.

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

15 As the people were filled with expectation, and *all* were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16John answered all of them by saying, ‘I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

As if water and fire weren’t enough, we have here another powerful elemental force, Wind. You didn’t hear the word “Word.” John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and Fire.” The word Spirit here is the same word for Wind and Breath, sharing the root with the verb to “blow.” Remember in John’s Gospel, the resurrected Jesus told the disciples “Receive the Spirit,” and he blew on them? Or, in the Book of Acts, which was also written by Luke, when the Pentecost came, there was “a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.

Then, John the Baptist gives this interesting, very tangible and specific image of Jesus holding a winnowing-fork. A winnowing-fork was used in ancient farming method to separate the grain and the chaff after harvesting sheaves of grain. After threshing them on the floor so the seeds of grain came apart from the chaff, the farmer would scoop up a bunch and toss it in the air, and the Wind will blow away the lighter chaff while the heavier grain would fall back onto the floor. The Wind actually did the work of blowing away the unwanted chaff, so they can be burned.

If Jesus has a winnowing fork in his hand, then he would need the Wind to get the work done. Now, I’ve heard how Wind is making the LA fires more difficult to control and contain; wind only adds to the destructiveness of the fire that indiscriminately burn anything on its path, as in the wildfire. But the Wind Jesus works with is the Holy Spirit, and they must work very closely.

The baptism of Jesus himself is mentioned by all 4 gospel writers. Both Mark and Matthew say that at Jesus’ baptism, as soon as he came up out of the water, the heavens were

opened and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove. Luke doesn't say much about the moment of Jesus' baptism at all. In fact, he mentions it as if in passing... He says, "when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized *and was praying*, the heavens were opened." Luke emphasizes how all the people were baptized and then Jesus was baptized just as one of them; Jesus joined the rest of

Then Luke says something other gospel writers don't mention. When Jesus had been baptized and *was praying*, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him. The Baptized Jesus turned first to prayer, and that was what prompted the heavens to open and for the Holy Spirit to come down. Prophet Isaiah had prayed to God centuries earlier "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...". When the Bible says, "the heavens were opened," it is God who is doing the opening.

We are not told what Jesus was praying. Prayer is not always asking God for things, whether for ourselves or for others, or telling God what to do. Sometimes it's stilling all voice within us so we can hear God's voice. Rather than filling the prayer with words, having conversation with God, we can empty ourselves in prayer, clearing our heart and mind of our thoughts, our wills, so God can fill it with God's wills and visions. Sometimes, words would not come, even if we tried, but God knows our needs before we can articulate them.

We can simply turn to God bearing our hearts and offering all that we are. And, when we have been shaken by fear and cannot even turn to God, the community of believers can carry them in their prayers.

Prompted by Jesus' prayer, the Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove. Luke is the only one who shows us the bodily form of the Holy Spirit. Spirit is not a dove but has a physical reality. It is real, it is in this world, in flesh.

The kind of prayer in which we empty ourselves to make room for God to enter in, inevitably changes us from within, giving us the power to see as God sees. And this is the God who promises not to lose us to anything or anyone and tells us not to fear. Then, even when the flame from the wildfire burn to ashes or the rivers of mighty water wash away all that we held dear, the Holy Spirit empowers us to see God's hand reaching even deeper in the heap of ashes and recover something life-giving, something that gives us hope. In places where we only devastation and despair, God says, no, I have something more for you, something far better. Fear not. For you are precious in my sight and you are mine.

When Jesus got in the line to be baptized by water, he joined himself to the rest of us, so, we, too can turn to God in prayer and hear God say, you are my Beloved, you are mine. Let us be a praying congregation this year, trusting in God who holds at a placer deeper than our despair, holding up for us a light of hope we may not yet see.