

The Insiders: Called By Name | Isaiah 43:1-7 | January 13, 2019
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The Insiders are those who are redeemed by God, baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. The Insiders are called by name by their loving, heavenly Father.

Every now and again, something happens that makes me ask a simple, but potentially frightening question. How does God really feel about me? How does God feel about this world we're living in? Every now and again, something will happen, often times a tragedy, a loss, a difficult time. How does God really feel about me?

Have you ever asked yourself this question? If God is looking at us, at our lives, at our work, at our families, how does he *feel* about us? And more than that, how do we *know*? How can we find out how this God feels about us? Where can we go? Where can we look? Are the experiences in our lives indicative of God's feelings about us? Frankly, I hope not:

Perhaps as we enter into a new year, you're still suffering from the effects of holiday-induced depression. Or more specifically, that yearly reminder of those you have lost in the recent or not so recent past. Have you asked yourself the question, "How does God feel about me?"

As we speak, my friends' infant son is lying in a hospital room, tubes and wires sticking out of his tiny body as he struggles to breathe on his own. He was born with his heart on the wrong side of his body and now he's got a collapsed lung. Is this indicative of how God feels about this young pastor and his wife? Of all people who should garner God's grace and favor certainly it's this guy and his family. But it seems as though God doesn't think much of them...

The earth and the waters rage, disasters wipe out the homes and even claim the lives of hundreds, thousands, millions. Is *this* how God feels about us and this world? It would seem as though He's mad at us, smiting us for our sinful infractions big or small.

Or maybe this question I've raised has raised another question in you: "Oh, God thinks about me??" I thought that certainly by now he had moved on to someone else. Why would God think about *me*? Certainly He's got better things to do...

It's a scary question to ask as we sit in the muck and mire of our lives, because if this is all we have to go on, if our own suffering or apathy or the suffering of others is our only evidence for how the God of the Universe feels about us, the answer should leave us trembling. If all we have to go on is what we experience day in and day out, what we see on TV or read in the news, perhaps we don't want to ask the question any more.

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However, if you *have* asked this question of God recently, if you've looked out into this broken world and wondered where, exactly, God is, my desire for you this morning is

that you will find immense comfort in our Old Testament reading for today. Our OT reading reads like a love letter from a Loving, yes you heard me, *loving* God to his people who themselves are crying out. This text for this morning answers, in no uncertain terms, the question, “How does God feel about me?”

In Isaiah 42, Israel feels the effects of God’s anger and wrath. How does God feel about their disobedience? How does God feel about their injustice? The Babylonian army makes it clear. God is not pleased.

Then we get to Isaiah 43. And how does it begin? But now. But now, things are turning around. But now, good news is triumphing over the bad. But now, God will show his people that, despite their sin, they are still his treasured possession.

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

These exiles in Babylon have not been abandoned and left to die. God has not forgotten them. God has not ignored them and their cries. No, God’s grace and love and favor is still in effect. They are still ones who have been created and formed by God himself - and God loves his creation! They are ones who have been redeemed...bought back by God himself. Indeed, they are ones who have been called by name, who have been claimed by God as His very own.

God isn’t ambivalent. God isn’t uncaring. God didn’t give up on Israel and God hasn’t given up on you. God hasn’t moved on to the next person no matter how spiritually dry or desolate your soul feels. You are still baptized, yes? He brought you through the waters of baptism, did he not? He washed you clean of all your sins? He united you to Christ’s death and resurrection, as Paul tells us, didn’t He?

So how do we know how God feels about you? Well, He tells *you*. He called you by name. You are still God’s child. You are still His priceless possession. You. Are. His.

And therefore, because you are God’s treasured possession, you are not alone in this life...in this place where you are. Listen to what God says in verse Is. 43:2:

²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

Because God has called you by name and because God has redeemed you, verse 2 is His promise to you. Just as God walked with Israel as they passed through the Red Sea...just as God went with them as they crossed the Jordan into the promised land. Just as God was with them as Babylon torched their temple and their homes. As God was present with Shadrach, Meshach, and Benny in the fiery furnace of Babylon...God is with *you* too.

No, this doesn't answer the question of why my friend's child is still in the hospital. It doesn't answer the question of just how long the holidays are going to be painful and lonely for you. But it doesn't tell us that we are not alone. In any of it. Fire or flood, God's presence is with us.

Why? Verse 3:

³For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your saviour;

See, ultimately, if you want to know how God feels about you and if you want to know if there is a God who is *for you* and not *against you* there is only one place you can look. You look to Jesus. There is nothing about our present struggles or trials or temptations that can tell us anything about God and his love for us. This present life is simply filled with sin. It can only tell us about that brokenness. It can only tell us of the problem...not the solution.

But to know about God's love? To know if you are his beloved child, his treasured possession, one who is precious in his eyes? Don't look to the world filled with sin, but look to something greater. Look to Jesus. You look to your Savior. Look to God who was born into this world, to take all of the world's sin and evil and brokenness...he took it all upon himself and crucified it and buried it.

Look to Jesus, God's only son whom God handed over for just that purpose of living and dying for you. This is the importance of our baptism, which demonstrates to us God's invitation to be The Insiders in His kingdom. Paul writes in our Epistle...

And yet, God is not just for us, for those already in His church. We saw last week that it's an unlikely lot that God is for and that God has invited to His table. Isaiah tells us that the West and East, the North and South, indeed, the entire creation, is filled with God's elect. From the four corners of the earth God will call them. Those who fancy themselves as outsiders, God calls by name...he calls them to be insiders as he calls us to be insiders in his kingdom. For his kingdom is filled with those he loves and redeems. It's filled with people like you and people like me.

It's filled with people who look at their lives and wonder, is there a god? And if there is, how does he feel about *me*? How does this God feel about my college career that was more party than study? How does this God feel about me and all my failures at work and at home? How does this God feel about about me, and my past?

As you go to work and school and to your kids or grandkids softball games, you'll encounter these people. Each and every day. People who are asking questions like, "What's the point of this life? Is there even purpose?", "Does god even exist?" Does God really love me? And if he does why is my life such a wreckhouse?

This morning God addresses that. He addresses it for you and me and for them too. For God is calling his people from the east and west, north and south. He's calling them to Himself through Jesus, proclaiming this good news that yes, indeed, they are *called by name* by their heavenly father. God *is* with them in the midst of the fire and the flood. The death and resurrection of Jesus is for *them*, too, and God is inviting them to enter into this grace through the gift of baptism.

This morning we go out not just as receivers or hearers of this promise. We go out as proclaimers of this promise. Where is God? He is with you. How does He feel about me? He loves you...he has called you by name...he has redeemed you from sin and death and the devil.

Conclusion

Whether you voice it or not, whether you have the courage to ask it in public or not, it's a question we all ask. Does God care about me and my suffering? Has God left me to suffer alone? Is He punishing me for something? Why do I feel so spiritually dead and dry inside? Has God's Spirit left me?

Isaiah's words this morning, this love letter from our loving heavenly father, speaks to us and speaks to this nagging question in the back of our minds. And it speaks these words:

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

Amen.