

Rev. Jennifer Peters McCurry
Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
January 10, 2010 • Baptism of our Lord
Isaiah 43:1-7 • Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Every once in a while, I stumble upon a note from my maternal grandfather, who died a couple years ago. His notes were not long or gushy. They usually came with a cartoon or an article that he thought I would enjoy. The mere fact that he wrote to me at odd times was a sign of his love. My favorites are when he actually wrote "I love you."

Love letters are precious things in our lives. I hear stories of people who cherish their spouse's letters, which were sent during war. Parents who find long lost cards or gifts from their once-young children. Adult children, who discover notes of love from deceased parents. They are perhaps particularly meaningful if they come after times of estrangement or stress: When the declaration of love is also sweet reconciliation.

Love letters remind us of, or re-immerses us in, a particular time of our relationships. They remind us of the many, small acts of love that make up our lives. That reveal the true nature of our most treasured relationships. They tell us about who we are, and how we relate to the world.

Today's lesson from Isaiah is God's love letter to the Jewish people. Akin to our treasured memories of loving reconciliation, It comes after a time when Israel felt estranged from God. The previous chapter of Isaiah, ends on a note of separation from God. It talks about the Lord, "against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey..." (*Isaiah 42:24*) There was brokenness in their relationship to God because of how their lives were marked by sin. That's something that we should all be familiar with.

Yet the wayward actions of God's people did not separate them from God forever. Regardless of what has been – "But now" – God speaks. The one "who created you, O Jacob, ... who formed you, O Israel." (*43:1*) God reminds them of their special relationship: "I have called you by name, you are mine." (*43:1*)

Like our personal love letters, the prophet speaks of feelings and sacrifices and actions. The words reveal the nature of Israel's relationship with God. God promises: When you pass through waters or fire, they shall not destroy you (*43:2*).

God's people are "precious in [God's] sight, and honored." Precious is not just a sentimental comment either. In the Old Testament, the word is used rarely. It appears only in cases of life and death – when one's life hangs in the balance. In *1 Samuel*, David spared the life of King Saul. In response, Saul says, "My life was precious in your eyes today." (*1 Sam 26:21*)

God's people are considered "precious" – because their lives are redeemed. God will sacrifice relationships with others in order to save Israel. Egypt, Cush, and Seba – all given in exchange. (43:3-4) It is a ransom, given up for Israel. And God will go to all lengths – to the four corners of the earth – to gather his people. (43:6)

This passage is particularly notable for one reason. Nowhere else in scripture does God say, "I love you." (43:4) This passage is the only place in both the Old and New Testaments where the language is so direct. Isaiah speaks to Jews on behalf of God, and the message is incredibly personal.

The prophet ends our reading with a promise to:

"... 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." (43:6-7)

The God of Israel expands this promise and love to reach beyond the Jewish people. It is meant for more than just the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is a gift meant for all the peoples of the world. For anyone who beholds God's love made flesh, in Jesus Christ. For all who hear and believe.

Many of us keep our love letters, and return to read them again and again. We do this for a reason. Our relationships of love mark us. We become "her son", or

“his wife”. They change how we understand our identities. They invite us to live as people who are beloved by others. To act in loving ways in response to what we have received.

Isaiah’s love letter reveals to us how Israel – and how we – are loved by God. We have been called by name and claimed. *(43:1)* Our imperfect lives are marked for redemption. A key moment for us all was at our baptisms. The firey Spirit showered upon each of us, drawing us into God’s family. For people like Ansel Iski, this moment was just a few weeks ago. For many of us, it seems like a lifetime ago.

On this Sunday, we also celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord. In a few moments, we will affirm our baptisms together, as we welcome new members into our congregation. It would be easy to think that Jesus and his baptism are similar to us and ours.

Yet there are big differences between Jesus’ baptism and ours. Yes, God the Father spoke words of love at Jesus’ baptism – similar to those in Isaiah. But the ultimate expression of God’s love for all of us is NOT words at all. Jesus himself was God’s most clear articulation of love for humanity. God’s love was/is expressed:

- In Christ’s being and body;

- In his miracles and in his teachings;
- In his acts of forgiveness and non-violence;
- In the power shown in his resurrection;
- In the life of the church, which the Spirit brings us.

Jesus, the (capital-W) Word of God, is God's love letter that tops them all.

Jesus is God's gift to all of humanity. Coming to be with us, even when we're a mess. Forgiving us, even when we don't understand what we've done. Teaching us what it means to live a whole, and happy life. Showing us how to live the love, that God's Spirit has breathed into our lives.

What a Word of love!