

Isaiah 43:1-7, NRSV: words of encouragement to a people living in exile

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. 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."

Luke 3:21-22, NRSV, an account of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and 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."

Do you like your name? Or would you have wished for another? Whatever you feel about your name, remember that it was given to you by people who loved you. In the passage from Isaiah, it is God who names. And beyond naming, God claims. Read again God's words, spoken through the prophet Isaiah: **"I have called you by name, you are mine."** And in the passage from Luke, at the moment of Jesus' baptism, God names and claims again: **"You are my Son, the beloved..."** In these moments, God's act of naming intimately connects God with those God loves – the Israelites, Jesus and, by extension, all of us! **YOU** are mine! **YOU** are called by name and claimed in love. That is God's promise: no matter who we are, we are named and claimed by God. Always and forever. How does it feel to be named God's beloved?

Isaiah also offers this:

"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."

Here God acknowledges that struggles are part of life, that suffering is a consequence of living. And it is God's reassurance that suffering is not an indication that God has abandoned you. God's pledges that when (not if!) difficult times come, God will be present in them and with you.

The Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock echoes this truth when speaking about Jesus: "A view that once dreamed that wherever the Messiah is, there is no misery, has been forged into the present conviction, wherever there is misery, there is the Messiah."

Does this ring true in your experience? Recall a time when you or someone you love was in a tough place. Did God's presence reassure you? Strengthen you? Who embodied God's steadfastness to you?

And again from God, by way of Isaiah...

"You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you..."

I wonder if these words from the heart of God startle you? Do they surprise because they seem soft or sentimental? Difficult to believe? Or do they astound you and bring you to your knees, because they are words that you have been yearning to hear? Try saying those words out loud! Take a moment to offer thanks to God for such incomparable love for you. Then take some more time to consider others who are aching to hear those words and desperate to trust them. Pray for them, too.

Remembering the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some words from Dr. King, who also heard God's voice, trusted God's love and heeded God's call.

I choose to identify with the underprivileged. I choose to identify with the poor. I choose to give my life for the hungry. I choose to give my life for those who have been left out of the sunlight of opportunity. I choose to live for and with those who find themselves seeing life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit sign. This is the way I'm going. If it means suffering a little bit, I'm going that way. If it means sacrificing, I'm going that way. If it means dying for them, I'm going that way, because I heard a voice saying, "Do something for others."

And this prayer, from early in his ministry...

Most gracious and all wise God, before whose face the generations rise and fall; Thou in whom we live, and move, and have our being. We thank thee for all of thy good and gracious gifts, for life and for health; for food and for raiment; for the beauties of nature and human nature. We come before thee painfully aware of our inadequacies and shortcomings. We realize that we stand surrounded with the mountains of love and we deliberately dwell in the valley of hate. We stand amid the forces of truth and deliberately lie. We are forever offered the high road and yet we choose to travel the low road. For these sins O God, forgive. Break the spell of that which blinds our minds. Purify our hearts that we may see thee. O God in these turbulent days when fear and doubt are mounting high give us broad visions, penetrating eyes, and power of endurance. Help us to work with renewed vigor for a warless world, for a better distribution of wealth and for a brotherhood that transcends race or color. In the name and spirit of Jesus we pray. Amen.

And this from MLK, Jr. to carry with you: "Use me, God. Show me how to take who I am, who I want to be, and what I can do, and use it for a purpose greater than myself."

Remembering Mary Oliver

Finally, while you are hunkered down, I encourage you to read a poem or two (or ten!) by the remarkable Mary Oliver, who died on Thursday. Her poems have long been my companions, and have made their way into plenty of prayers and sermons at Bethany. You can find many of her poems online. Google her! I think her words will settle well with you and that you will savor them. There are too many gems to name here, but on this snowy weekend, it seems fitting to suggest that you look for *First Snow* or *Snowy Night* and read them in their entirety. But don't stop there! Check out *Wild Geese*, *The Summer Day*, (a nice escape from winter!), *In Blackwater Woods*, *Making the House Ready for the Lord* (it's about radical hospitality!) and keep going...

Here is a snippet from *Snowy Night*:

"Snow was falling,
so much like stars
filling the dark trees
that one could easily imagine
its reason for being was nothing more
than prettiness."

A Song to Take You On Your Way

Now as you move on to whatever calls you – football, a nap, a board game – and you want a lively tune to get you going (and to remind you that God calls YOU) check out *Listen, God is Calling.*, a song from Tanzania. There is a version sung in Swahili and English by students in Tanzania here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMFFj_4WR1I

This version has sheet music so that you can sing along:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g8rCNdRIOOQ>

Bless your hearts, everybody!

Kim