

"By Name!"
Isaiah 43:1-7

January 13, 2019
Our Lord

The Baptism of

Do you remember getting mailings from the Publishers Clearing House and other organizations regarding sweepstakes? I remember the first one I ever saw. It said on the front "You have just won \$10 million." I was so excited. I thought of all the things we could buy: the new house, new car, new bicycle for me, and many other things. So, I ran to my mother with this bit of good news and she kind of smiled. She pointed out to me that, first of all, in the small print, it said "may" between the "You" and "have". What the sentence really said was, "You may have just won \$10 million." Second of all, she pointed out to me that the envelope was addressed to "current resident of" and then our house address. I was so disappointed. I vowed that I would never believe such a possible prize unless my name was on it.

Scams and deceptions have always existed. They have become more sophisticated in the Internet and social media age. People have become quite cynical and skeptical of any potential benefit promised to them. Unless we see a definitive promise with our name on a signed check, we won't believe, nor will we even pay any attention. When something is too good to be true, we think, it probably is.

This way of thinking may influence our consideration for our text today from Isaiah. Through the prophet, the Lord offers an invitation to us to never be afraid. Emotionally, this is the equivalent of a \$10 million check from Publishers' Clearinghouse Sweepstakes. Not be afraid? Ever? That would be a wonderful gift which would be too good to be true and, if it were possible to be true, then it surely must apply to someone else whose life is more stable than ours.

There are so many serious and justifiable reasons for feeling afraid in this day and age. People are more polarized than they ever been. Our society seems to be unraveling before our very eyes. There is hatred, conflict, and fighting among various groups. There are shootings in various public places almost every day. The government continues to be shut down which threatens the continuation of various important services and the welfare of federal employees who have to work for free now.

Each of us faces personal problems which can make us afraid. We face illness, injury, and even death for ourselves and for our loved ones. There are conflicts in our marriages, our homes, our places of employment, and even in the church. With fear, we wonder how those situations will ever be resolved without blowing up our entire lives.

How can we free ourselves from fear? Fear, it seems, has taken up a permanent lease in the house next door and refuses to leave. And when fear moves in, everything else that is good departs. Have you ever heard of happiness and fear coexisting? Someone being confident and afraid at the same time? No. Fear chases out everything that's good and fills up the room with itself.

God has some powerful words for us about fear in our Old Testament lesson for today. In this section, the Lord says, "Fear not." It's so important to Him that He tells us the same thing twice. We wonder if such a command is really true or is it just another sweepstakes promise? And, even if it is true, is it for us? Is it for you? Is it for me? Nevertheless, the Lord God urges us to believe that we can be free of fear and confident in him. We can have fearless living. But how?

In order to escape fear and live fearlessly, we first must know what fear is and where it comes from. Is fear simply a bad habit which can be overcome with a dose of bravery? Or is it much worse? When Satan tempted Eve in the garden, Eve feared that there something lacking in her life, something which the Lord had not provided her. That fear led her to disobey God and sin. Thus, fear produced sin.

After Adam and Eve had sinned, they "heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden." When asked by the Lord God why they hid, Adam replied, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." Adam and Eve's sin led them to fear God and hide from Him. Thus, sin produce fear.

So, which is it? Does fear produce sin or does sin cause fear? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Fear and sin go together. They are inextricably linked. Together, sin and fear drive us from the presence of God. And, apart from the presence of God, there is only death and hell. When you are afraid, it demonstrates your sin and separation from the presence of the God who created you, loves you, and cares for you. When you sin, then you will experience fear for the very same reason – separation from God. Such a drastic problem requires a drastic solution. Fear can be eradicated only when sin is eradicated. And that's the solution Isaiah proclaims to us.

The Lord's gracious dealings with Israel foreshadow His gracious dealings with us. He had created and formed Israel by His grace and mercy. When Israel was in the bondage of slavery in Egypt, trapped in fear, facing sure death, the Lord redeemed them, that is, He paid the price for their release from slavery. It was not inexpensive. The Lord God said, "I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you....I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life." The Lord would give up all of these nations, seemingly more powerful and wealthy, in order to possess Israel.

But Israel was more than a nation and a people to God. The Lord called each of them personally and by name. He addresses them individually. The "you" used in the text is a singular verb, not plural. In other words, the Lord is not saying, "I have called you all as a group or I have called you as a people, but I have called each of you by name."

Israel had no need to fear. The Lord had created and formed them. He had redeemed them – paid the price to possess each of them – and He called them each by name and He placed His name upon each one of them individually (Numbers 6:27). He led them through the waters safely – through the Red Sea and out of slavery and through the Jordan River and into the Promised Land. There they dwelt securely in the presence of the Lord and without fear.

In the same way, the Lord has dealt with us. He created and formed us by His grace and mercy. When we were in our self-imposed slavery of sin and trapped in the fear that goes with it, the Lord redeemed us. He paid a price – a very high price - to possess us. As a holy God, He could not simply look the other way or dismiss our sin. He had to pay a price for our release. It was far more expensive than the land, power, and wealth of the nations which He gave for Israel's release from slavery in Egypt.

The Lord God paid with the life of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' blood shed on the cross and His holy life offered there, God has purchased for Himself a new Israel – the people of God. And the blood of Jesus covers over all of our sin. It doesn't matter how much it is. It doesn't matter how often you've done it. Jesus' blood forgives all of it.

He has called each of us by name by putting His name upon us in our baptism. We have been baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. His name has been connected to each of our names and, because of that, wonderful things have happened to us.

That is why we observe with joy the Baptism of our Lord on this 1st Sunday after the Epiphany. Jesus was not baptized because He needed to be cleansed from sin. Rather, just as the Lord God led Israel through water – the water of the Red Sea – out of slavery in Egypt and fear of Pharaoh and the water of the Jordan River into the freedom and peace of a Promised Land – so, in an even more glorious way, Jesus has led us through the water of Holy Baptism by going through it Himself.

Through the water of Baptism, God has led each of us by name out of the slavery of sin in our own Egypt and the fear our Pharaoh, Satan, and death which go with it because we have been joined to Jesus' death as our epistle reading for today says. Through the water of Baptism, each of us has entered Promised Land of the presence of God and the freedom and peace and life which go with it because we have been joined to Jesus' resurrection.

This frees us, not only from sin, but from fear as well. When you look around at our world which is infested with sin and corrupted by it, don't be afraid. When you see floods and fires, crime and violence, economic disasters and social unrest, war and death, and everything else that is wrong about this world, remember our Lord's words, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you." You and I are getting out of this mess. The Lord God has paid the price to get us out. Neither will He will not forget us, abandon us, or even overlook us while we are in this mess. He says, "I have called you by name, you are mine."

Yet, traveling through this wilderness of earth on our journey to the final Promised Land in heaven can be difficult and lonely. But we do not travel alone. God has joined us in our baptism to Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus has joined Himself – His very body and Very blood – to bread and wine in the Lords Supper. As we live in our baptism and participate in the Communion, we are strengthened in our unity with Him and one another. Therefore, we journey unafraid and confident.

When the awful things of life hit a little too close to home and you do experience suffering personally, rather than simply observing it from afar, don't fear. When you fail a test at school, are rejected by friends, get cancer, lose a job, go into debt,

experience the death of a loved one, or even face death yourself, remember our Lord's words, "Fear not, for I am with you." The Lord does not simply pay for our final destination in heaven and wait there for us to arrive. He goes with us on our journey through life, experiencing every problem, every suffering, and every evil situation with us, protecting us from much of it and supporting us through the rest of it.

A comedy program in the 1980s called *Cheers* was set in a bar in Boston and made the claim, both in its theme song and in many of its storylines, that it was "a place where everybody knows your name." People gravitate, both to that specific bar and to many other establishments of that kind, because they feel safe and accepted in a place "where everybody knows your name."

In a sense, that is what's going on here at church. It may not be a place "where everybody knows your name" (although we strive toward that goal) it is a place where the One who needs to know your name does. You are not a stat on a membership roll to God. You are not a drop in the ocean of Christianity to Jesus. Each of you, young or old; rich or poor; new Christian or lifelong member; is known by God and redeemed by Jesus Christ. He has called each of you, not by gender, ethnic group, economic level or by any other group membership, but by name. You are his. No matter what evil we face as a nation, as a congregation, or as individuals in the upcoming days, months, and years ahead, the Lord, in a very confident, though calm, manner says to each of us, "Fear not. I have called each of you by name. You are mine." Amen.