

## January 10

Scripture: Isaiah 43:1-7

Sermon: You are Mine

When we hear the word covenant these days it is almost always related to real estate. Covenants are signed agreements that you enter into when you purchase a home in certain locales where you promise to engage in or refrain from a specified action on the use of property. If you live where there is a home owners association you know all about covenants. So when we talk about God's covenant with us we may not really know what that means. It is a formal agreement made by God with a religious community or with humanity in general. In our tradition we talk about the covenant God entered into with the Hebrew people, "I will be your God and you will be my people." The Ten Commandments and other laws were given to tell the people how to live into that covenant. Unfortunately much of the Old Testament is also the story of what happens when you break that covenant. Christians later saw this covenant expanding to include those who follow Christ. "We are children of God and joint heirs with Christ," we say. This is a form of covenant because we are proclaiming a special familial relationship to God. We believe that Jesus, through his words and life, taught us how to live as obedient and, more importantly, beloved children of God. The scripture that we read today from Isaiah is a restatement of God's covenant with the people of Israel. It was shared by Isaiah soon after their return from captivity in Babylon. Its words of reassurance and hope are just as meaningful today. Let us see what word God has to share with us as we begin this new year.

It begins with a reminder that God is "the one who formed you, Israel, and that I have called you by name and you are mine." A person's name was the key to their character in Biblical times. When a person's status changed so did their name. Abram became Abraham when he responded to the call of God. Jacob becomes Israel after struggling with the angel of God. To say God knows our name is to say God knows us most intimately. God knows our character, our aspirations and, yes, our failings. Even with this most intimate of visions God still says, "you are mine and I love you just as you are."

This was a word of reassurance that the people of Israel needed. Life had been very challenging with the destruction of Jerusalem. It was still challenging as they tried to rebuild their lives. They were still under the control of the Persians. Many wondered if God really cared about them. To have Isaiah share that God remembered the covenant, that they are God's special people, that God knows them intimately was words of reassurance. It would give them hope.

We too need this reminder. That awareness that God knows us as intimately as this should be good news. But I am aware that it might, at first, seem more scary than reassuring. We feel a little like the kids in the song about Santa. "He knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake" with the implied threat that if you are not good you will get a lump of coal in your stocking. God's covenant with us is more about grace and less about threat. God says I know you intimately and even when you break the covenant I am there for you because you are mine. You might be going through difficult times but you are not going through this alone. God remembers the covenant God has with us and as Christians we celebrate that we are beloved children of God. And all good parents never forget their children no matter their age or what life choices they have made. Even to this day, my 94 year old mother can't help being my mother! She worries about me, reminds me to take care of myself. It is funny and yet comforting.

The awareness that God is with us helps us hear the next challenge that Isaiah presents. We are told to not fear. The opposite of fear is faith. Because we can have confidence in the God who has called and claimed us, we need not be overcome by fear. Isaiah talks about "Waters . . . fire." Believers are not immune to difficulty. Christians get sick, have family problems, lose their jobs, and face the same adversities as everyone else. Instead of overwhelming us, we are reminded that we can face anything, secure in the knowledge that our God is in control. Secure in the knowledge that God says to us, "you are mine."

We forget what a powerful force for good in our lives is this message. Unfortunately, we are made aware of it when we see its lack in another. I have a good

friend whose adoptive son lit into her about her faith on Christmas Eve. He has had a lot of challenging things happen in his life and has decided that a God who would let things like that happen is not a God he wants in his life and anyone who worships God is a fool. She poured out her sorrow to me in an email. I shared how unfortunate it is that some people want to blame other's poor choices on God and I reminded her that God loved her and was with her in this time. A few hours later I received an upbeat email. Three different friends from church unexpectedly came by to wish her the blessings of the season. She had heard from a niece who shared great news. She was feeling surrounded by love and thanked me for reminding her that she was and is always loved by God.

This message is a powerful reminder that whatever we are facing we are not going through this alone. We are challenged to let go of fear which means trusting in God with us. This is always a good reminder but never more so than at the beginning of a new year. When we look back over 2015 some of what happened was planned and expected. Much of it probably came as a surprise. Some of it the good kind, but many faced the unexpected loss of a loved one, health issues that stopped other plans in their tracks, and more. In looking at those times when we were going through the waters of tribulation or the fires of loss we see how God was with us.

This gives us the assurance to face the coming year without fear. We know no more what we will be dealing with in 2016 than we did last year. There may be those challenging things that we know are coming, like a move or surgery. But mostly it is unknown. There is much that could fill us with fear. The "what ifs" of life are often fear inducing. A reminder that God knows us by name and has been with us in the past gives us the confidence to move forward in trust, not fear.

This year we got a Christmas letter from a friend. It has been a year of incredible struggles. She lost her husband in late summer and then immediately broke her hip and had to have surgery and then her heart acted up while she was at the rehab facility. This means her rehab will take longer and she will be in the place until after Christmas. As she wrote her letter sharing all of her calamities this year I expected it to end with a

“pray for me and that next year will be better.” Instead it ended with statements about how God is Good. She shared how friends rallied around her to help her plan her husband’s memorial service. How family was faithful in seeing her at the facility. How the staff there had been wonderful. She reminded all who read her letter that the God who came to earth at Bethlehem in the form of Jesus is with us and helping us at times just such as this. 2015 was a tough year for her. She was the first to admit that but it had not dampened her love of life and her faith in God. She knew who’s she was for she had felt God with her all this year and I am sure is looking forward, not with fear but anticipation, for what will happen, both planned and surprising, that will occur in 2016.

The people of Israel needed a reminder that they were precious in the eyes of God after all they had suffered. We too need that assurance at times. Through the loving actions of others, God’s faithfulness is always felt. It is our trust in God’s love in the midst of the trials and tribulations of life that are a constant reminder of the gracious covenant we have entered through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It allows us to embrace what is to come without fear.