

It's the New Year. Yet, the mood around us seems rather blah.

Maybe it's because of the rather severe political divisions in our country. We just came through a tough season of mid-term elections in November that seemed to highlight our differences. This has been followed by a government shutdown in December and January. And it looks like we can look forward to another 2 years of hyper-partisan politics and gridlock and dysfunction in Washington. Blah.

Or, maybe it's the economy. The stock market has been very volatile of late. At times it looks like we're moving into a bear market. Maybe things will improve. Maybe they won't. But either way, Blah.

Or, maybe it's less serious. Maybe it's the post-Christmas letdown. Your wallet may be strained from buying too many Christmas presents. The fit of your clothes may be strained from too much Holiday food. Your eyes may be strained from watching too many college bowl games. Plus, Texas Tech didn't even play in a bowl game this year. Blah.

Yet, it's now 2019. And we're a week into the season of Epiphany. Epiphany means "shining forth." And during Epiphany we focus on God's glory shining forth in the world.

And in 2019, we celebrate God's shining forth with 2 feast days on back to back Sundays. Last week was the actual Feast of Epiphany, when we celebrated the Wisemen coming from afar to worship the infant Jesus. And today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, the day when Jesus hears the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased."

Fortunately for us, in the midst of the New Year blahs, both of these feasts offer us hope. And, though you may not have noticed, both of these feasts have OT lessons from the same book, the Book of Isaiah. Both last week's and this week's readings, from the 43rd and 60th chapters of Isaiah contain the spiritual cure for the spiritual blahs, if we'll listen.

Last week the bishop was here, and he briefly mentioned Isaiah 60. But he didn't go into it in depth. So this week I want to talk about both last week's and this week's readings from Isaiah 43 and Isaiah 60.

Let's start with today's lesson from Isaiah ch43. This part of Isaiah is from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Prophet Isaiah of the three prophets whose prophecies are bound together in the one book of Isaiah.

The context of 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is this. The people have been through some bad times. They've actually been through really bad times. Their country has been destroyed. They are in exile. And God reminds them of the pain of these things in ch42. But then God gives them comfort in ch43. Today we heard these words:

*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.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Is 43:1

God gives his people three reminders. 1) God is the one who created us. 2) God has redeemed or saved us. And 3) God claims us as his own, he calls us by name.

God doesn't just give us life. He saves us from the power of sin and death, so that we might have relationship with him forever. A marvelous, marvelous reminder.

And that relationship is the source of God's promise. Isaiah continues:  
*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.*<sup>2</sup>

That is a wonderful statement. Think about it. Water and fire. Two of the most powerful forces of nature. Often they are very destructive forces of nature. Yet God promises, you shall not be overwhelmed. You shall not be burned. The waves of life may crash against you. The flames of life may flare up around you. 'But I'll be there with you' God says. 'I am your savior.'

This is summed up again when God says, "Do not fear, for I am with you."<sup>3</sup>

Whether we're in the midst of minor irritations or in the midst of catastrophes, whether we've got the blahs, or we've got big problems, that promise is there. "Do not fear, for I am with you." Why? God says, "Because you are precious in my sight, and I love you."<sup>4</sup>

You are precious. I love you. What an amazing statement that is. In our Gospel lesson, God says to Jesus at his baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."<sup>5</sup> But Isaiah reminds us that that same message from God applies to us: "You are precious in my sight, and I love you."

Can you hear God saying this to you? Can you live into this wonderful affirmation?

God loves you. Oftentimes, we forget this or ignore this or twist this. So often we Christians have changed the Good News of God's love in Jesus Christ into some sort of a hellfire and brimstone message of sinners in the hands of an angry God.

Therefore, we sometimes view Christianity as some sort of preventative medicine, a way of avoiding negative consequences, avoiding punishment from an angry God.

But that puts a bad spin on things spiritually. That takes us down some bad pathways.

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<sup>2</sup> Is 43:2

<sup>3</sup> Is 43:5

<sup>4</sup> Is 43:4

<sup>5</sup> Lk 3:22

Why do I want salvation? As some sort of a 'get out of Hell free card'? No. I want to put my trust in Jesus Christ because I seek relationship with the God who loves me. I want to be with him forever.

Why do we bring our kids to get baptized? Is it some sort of inoculation? Is it because we don't want our kids to go to hell, so we get them baptismal "fire insurance"? No, we bring our children to the font because we want them to be God's people, to grow up in the knowledge and love of God.

Why do I want to spend time in prayer and worship? Because I'm supposed to? No. I want to be with the one I love, the one who loves me.

Why do I what God commands? Because if I do I'll go to heaven and if I don't I'll be punished? No. I want to do it in order to become more and more like the one who loves me. God loves me. And I want to become more and more loving myself. As I grow up, I want to be like my heavenly Father, the one who loves me and calls me to be more loving.

In the face of God's love, what can the currents and flames of life do to us? The answer, God tells us, ultimately nothing. "I am with you... You are precious in my sight... and I love you."

That's a vital perspective to hold on to. Things may seem bad at times. But ultimately, God promises to be with us through all the trials of life, because he loves us.

The bottom line of Isaiah 43 is this. Don't sweat the small stuff. And with God's love and protection, it's all small stuff. Even death itself is small stuff, compared with the love God has for us, a love that conquers death, a love that brings eternal life. That's a good dose of perspective amidst the blahs of the season and the uncertainty that 2019 might bring. That's a good dose of perspective no matter what the future holds. God tells us, "You are precious in my sight... and I love you."

So, in the face of God's love for us, what are we called to do? That answer comes from our OT lesson from last week, from the 60th chapter of Isaiah. This is part of the writings of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah. 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah's time is a time after the people have returned from exile. They're back home. But things aren't as great as they used to be. It's a rather blah time for the Jewish people. And God sends his message to them through 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah. The response is twofold:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come.*

"Arise" and "shine." Two verbs. Two commands: arise and shine:

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,  
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.  
For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples.<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> Is 60:1-2

Thick darkness. What a powerful image. I sometimes feel like I'm covered in thick darkness, like I'm swimming in molasses. All the struggles and blahs of life. In the midst of the molasses blahs, in the midst of thick darkness, we are commanded, arise and shine.

There's a great lyric by the rock group U2. It goes, "Kick the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight."<sup>7</sup>

That's what 3<sup>rd</sup> Isaiah is telling us. That's what God is telling us. If you're surrounded by spiritual molasses and thick darkness, kick the darkness 'til it bleeds daylight. Arise and shine.

But we don't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We don't work our own way out of the molasses solely through our own actions. We do it in response to God. As Isaiah says,

*For darkness shall cover the earth,  
and thick darkness the peoples;  
but the LORD will arise upon you,  
and his glory will appear over you.*<sup>8</sup>

Notice that. God arises. God's glory shines. And in response to what God has already done for us, we are called to do the same. We can kick at the darkness because God has already shined his light upon us.

Isaiah continues, "Then you shall see and be radiant."<sup>9</sup> Notice the order. First you see. Lift up your eyes and look at what God is doing around you. Look around and witness his glory.

Then in response, "be radiant." Shine. But not with your own glory. Shine with God's glory. Take what you have seen and experienced and reflect it to the world.

Think of the sun and moon. The sun and moon are very different.

The sun is a gigantic nuclear furnace, a self-sustaining explosion of energy that gives off enormous amounts of heat and light.

By contrast, the moon is a cold, lifeless piece of rock. It is 64 million times smaller than the sun. The moon by itself is tiny and dark and barren. Yet the moon does two things. 1) It basks in the sun's heat and light. And 2) it reflects some of that light, bringing light to the dark side of the earth.

Our job is to be like the moon. First we are called to bask in God's glory. Forsake the blahs, and remember where the source of your light and life is. It is God. Turn to him, look and see his glory. Bask in his love.

Second, we are to shine and reflect some of that glory to others. We ourselves are not the source of light and life and love. But we can reflect a small portion of it to others. Like the night side of the earth, someone may be turned away from the light. But like the moon, you can reflect some of God's light to those who sit in thick darkness.

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<sup>7</sup> "God Part II" *Rattle and Hum*

<sup>8</sup> Is 60:2

<sup>9</sup> Is 60:5

God light shines forth in the world in the person of Jesus Christ. Turn to that light, and share it with others.

Kick at the darkness.

Reflect the light.

Bask in the love God has for you.