

Sermon: What Changes in This World Today?

Year C, Baptism of the Lord, or First Sunday after the Epiphany

[Isaiah 43:1-7](#); [Psalm 29](#); [Acts 8:14-17](#); [Luke 3:15-17, 21-22](#)

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The first reading this morning is from the book of Acts, chapter 8 verses 14 to 17, which you can find on page 892 of your pew Bible.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God,

Samaria had accepted the word of God! Samaria had its own version of the Old Testament. The five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. No psalms, no prophets, no histories. Good Jews travelled out of their way to avoid going through Samaria because the people there were so strange, so misguided in their beliefs. Sure, it was theoretically possible that Samaria had accepted the word of God, but so unlikely. I struggled to come up with something that would seem as surprising. *When the season ticket holders at Fenway Park had accepted the Yankees* was the best I could do, but that doesn't really convey how bone deep unlikely such an acceptance would be.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus).

You guys remember the Pentecost story when the tongues of fire appear above the heads of the disciples, and everyone speaks languages they didn't know they knew. That event hadn't happened yet. So Peter and John were working on converting people based on history: Jesus had come, Jesus had been killed, Jesus had risen from the dead. Everyone should want in on a faith that did that.

Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Here's what I want you to notice. Peter and John said, essentially, God be with these people. And God was. Not only is God in this world. God is in this world on demand.

The second reading this morning is from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 43, verses 1 to 7, which you can find on pages 585 to 586 in your pew Bible.

*But now thus says the LORD,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:*

Remember that God changed Jacob's name to Israel when Jacob wrestled with that angel as he returned to repent and face his brother's anger at having stolen his birthright. God makes a nation from a single family, from a single individual. God's story is told through particular individuals, many of them pretty flawed people.

*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;*

Remember that for the Israelites, they are essentially a desert people, a nomadic herding people who have settled in a semi-arid area with a small inland lake and no good harbors on the

Mediterranean. In the Bible, most of the time, when you hear about “water” it’s a stand in for “chaos”. So God will be with us when we are in the heart of chaos.

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*

Rivers play a key role in the Old Testament. They are the thing you cross to start a new chapter in your story. You cross the marshes of the Red Sea to escape Pharaoh, you cross the River Jordan into the land of milk and honey. On this day, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we celebrate Jesus’ baptism in that same River Jordan.

*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.*

Egypt was the breadbasket of the eastern Mediterranean. With the annual flood of the Nile, Egypt regularly produced agricultural surpluses. For a people who lived in subsistence agriculture, when a good year meant you had enough to eat, the idea of consistent surpluses, such abundance, is a fantasy of wealth. Ethiopia and Seba are both the source of luxury trade goods as well as the end points of overland trading empires. They are nations wealthy because the wealth of Africa and India flow through them. How precious must we be if God will give such unimaginable wealth for us?

*Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love 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—*

When this chapter in Isaiah was written, the Israelites were a captured people, held in Babylon away from their homes. And their children were doing what kids do. They were growing up and falling in love with others from the community around them. They moved away, at least away from the Jewish community they came from, even if it was just down the street or across town. Their parents dreamed of returning home to Israel, and yet, if they did, it meant leaving their children and grandchildren behind, never to be seen again. And what parent can make that choice? So God reassures them that they are not making that choice if they head home.

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—*

When daughters married, they traditionally became part of their husband's household. That's part of why the Bible is so insistent on caring for widows. Because they are so much more vulnerable if their dead husband's family won't care for them. We have daughters, we are daughters, we're married to daughters, we're brought into this world by daughters. No matter what the cultural tradition is, we sleep better when we know where all our ducklings are, especially when they are under our roof. So yes, bring our sons from far away, but bring our daughters too.

*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.'*

I had Candy make an insert out of the Isaiah reading because I thought it was beautiful, I thought it was important to have that reminder so you could stick it to your fridge or put it somewhere for when you needed it.

Bottom line, God says: *Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.* We were formed and made, called by God's name, created for God's glory. Not only is God in this world, but God is in this world on demand.

But it's not news. Or at least I hope it's not. So what changes because we have this text in our lives? I began making a list of how we could be better parents or kids, better partners or employees, how we could better fulfill God's intention for us in this world. I was thinking along the lines of some good general examples and then encouraging you to identify what changes in your life because it's true.

Except that I realized I was doing that so I could avoid having to answer that in my own life. So after several rounds of answers that I wanted to be true, so I could have a rosier image of myself, I got impatient with myself. *What changes in my life today because I am loved by God, I am created by God for God's glory, because God is in this world on demand?* I was waking myself up worried about Annual Meeting, worried about the worship service in Hollis, worried about getting this worship service pulled together, worried about not getting a particular piece of my parents' financial life taken care of this week. I was worried about not getting stuff done because I was sick. I was sick at an inconvenient time.

No one, not one single person, anywhere in my life, said anything other than, "Gosh, Cath, you sound awful. You need to rest and drink lots of fluids. Don't worry about it. We got it." The one meeting I did get to this week, about the worship service in Hollis on January 20th, Yifan showed up with some hot ginger ... I'm going to say "tea", I don't know what it was, which was wonderful. And still, I was waking myself up, worried that I wouldn't get everything done.

I am not what I accomplish. I am not what I produce. I am not what I make possible for other people to accomplish or produce. Today, this week, I am sick. And I need to sleep and drink

lots of fluids and let my body recover. That's what changes in my life because I am loved by God, I am created by God for God's glory and because God is in this world on demand. God's in charge. I can curl up with hot ginger tea and sleep. God has put loving, competent, gorgeous people around me who have told me, explicitly, that they've got it, they've got all the things I'm worried about not getting done.

I tell you this not so you'll take care of me or feel guilty that somewhere in my nutty brain I was trying to get stuff done when you were telling me you were taking care of what needed taking care of. I tell you this so that when you look at the text from Isaiah 43 on the fridge or wherever you put it, you might realize that what changes in this world may be super small. They may only last for the length of a common cold. But those changes build on themselves, so long as you are willing to come back to them again and again.

Because what doesn't change, is that you are loved by God, you are created by God for God's glory and God is in this world on demand. And that changes everything