



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 1 (C)

By Name

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

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine,” says God to a community of exiled people.

The promises spoken in Isaiah 43:1-7 give assurance and comfort amid uncertainty. God’s people have been exiled. They have been driven away from their homes. They do not know what is next. They have been waiting for a *really* long time. This has probably led to feelings of anxiety and deep disappointment. These are words of hope and comfort to a displaced people — that God had indeed not abandoned them.

In fact, God does not just view them as merely a group of exiles or captives. God knows each one, *by name*. There is great comfort in knowing that God cared enough to know the names of each and every one. God calls this community, which has experienced great loss and oppression, precious. Redeemed. Worthy of knowing their names. God knows them and knows what they are experiencing. God calls them out of exile back home. In this passage, God is telling them, “You can go home now.” They have a journey ahead, but God is promising to be with them on the way back home.

Knowing someone’s name implies a relationship. It opens the door for acts of care and kindness. When you hear that someone is in trouble, and you know their name, you might be inclined to act. In this case, God acts on behalf of God’s people.

Those in power have cast this community aside and spread them apart. God calls them by name and gathers them together. God, as the great namer, claims them as worthy and promises a future where God will be with them at every twist and turn of the journey.

Whatever it is up ahead, God will be with them. In fact, the passage says, “*When* you pass through the waters” and “*When* you walk through fire.” God is not promising that they will avoid hardship or difficult times. Yet, God does promise God’s presence during those times. Difficult days are not proof that God is no longer present. They are days in which God’s presence is felt in ways that stop us in our tracks. They are those days when God’s love dances alongside grief and sorrow. In the worst of moments, it can make a world of a difference to not have to be alone.

Whatever community you know that feels forgotten – perhaps it is your own – God is calling by name, gathering up, and gifting God’s presence. This is good news!

The passage goes on with prophetic imagery of offspring being gathered from the east and the west, the north and the south. It is like God is a community organizer knowing that there is strength in togetherness. The journey from exile into liberation happens in community. The journey home does not have to be taken alone.

God is still doing that — gathering us into communities of faith in our neighborhoods and cities. From the east and the west, the north and the south, we meet together as God’s beloved people. We keep showing up to remind ourselves and each other that God is always redeeming. Whomever God calls precious we are also to value. God gathers God’s people together from different places, with different journeys because God knows we need each other. It is a beautiful thing when our paths cross with another. Together we remember those sacred promises:

*“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.”*

Whatever it is up ahead, God will be with you. Whatever it is up ahead, God will be with us.

In the same way that God called God’s people by name when they were in exile, God calls each of us by name today.

You might think it isn't that big of a deal that God knows our names. Certainly, God knows our names — God is God, right? The creator of the universe? But if you’ve ever moved away from home or been in a new place where few people know you — you know the gift of someone remembering your name. In fact, it can be a balm in the depths of loneliness. It can remind you that you are worthy of being loved. There is a sacredness to remembering a name. There is comfort in knowing that God knows the name of that friend you are desperately praying for.

It might seem like a simple thing, but it matters: *God remembers our names.*

People living with dementia may not remember their names at any given moment. Yet, if they grew up in the Church, they tend to remember the lyrics to those old Gospel songs they grew up singing in the choir — or the liturgy they recited Sunday after Sunday at that little country church down the road. It might be the lyrics to *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* or the words to the Lord’s Prayer. There is something about those old,

long-trodden paths that can bring someone back, if just for a moment. God remembers our names even if we forget. The sacred memory of God makes room for everyone.

The great hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray has a hymn entitled “God in Whose Memory No One Is Lost.” Just the title of this song could be an entire sermon! The song reminds us that the God who calls us by name also remembers those names. When we forget these promises, God reminds us. There is an assurance in a God who promises to be with us the whole journey home. We may not always sense God’s presence in the present. That’s okay. For when we take time to look back, we may realize that God had been there the whole time. In the gift of our friends, in the beauty of the earth around us, or in those quiet moments.

Remember the words from Isaiah when you are far from home, when you’ve lost your way, or when you are afraid. In loss. In grief. In hope. God will be with you. The divine presence might just be enough to give you the courage and strength you need for whatever lies ahead. Amen.

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