

No Fear of Being Swept Away

Isaiah 43:1-7 (NIV)

¹ But now, this is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.” ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. ³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. ⁴ Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. ⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth— ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

In college, I remember a spring break mission trip where during some down time we got to relax on a beach in California. I fancied myself a pretty good swimmer. So, I started swimming out into the Pacific Ocean. I got a good ways out, and then decided it was time to turn around. I tried swimming back to shore, and it was a struggle. Every wave pulled at my body trying to carry me out farther into the ocean, so much so that I felt like I was swimming in place. As my body was tiring, there was a moment when I wondered if I would be swept away by the waters. I kept at it, conserving my energy while also pushing forward until I finally made it to where I could stand again, anchor myself with my feet. Any time I have been in an ocean since, I have not been so bold as to go past the point where my feet left the sandy floor, where I have the confidence of my feet anchoring me so that I’m not going to be swept away by the waters.

Water is a powerful force that can easily overwhelm us. In looking back on previous notes for this Sunday, I was reminded of this fact even more as it was 3 years ago to this weekend when I learned that a young man that I confirmed back in Michigan was swept away by oceans waves. He was strong and healthy, had a fight about him that gave his family hope of finding him alive until they didn’t. With all our strength, all our determination, all our fight, it’s not enough to anchor ourselves from being swept away by the waters.

The Israelites had just heard from Isaiah a strong message of judgment. “Who handed Jacob over to become loot, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned? For they would not follow his ways; they did not obey his law. So he poured out on them his burning anger, the violence of war. It enveloped them in flames, yet they did not understand; it consumed them, but they did not take it to heart.” (Isaiah 42:24-25) The Israelites had anchored themselves to their own ways, to their genealogical heritage, to their Temple building, but not to God. Because of their disobedience, God would send the violence of war upon them. Jerusalem would be destroyed. The people would be exiled. The Israelites were losing their anchors and so were afraid of being swept away in the waters of judgment.

When we love our lives and the things of this life and put our confidence in them, we anchor ourselves to those things, just like trusting my feet to keep me anchored to the sandy sea floor. What have we tied or anchored our identity, our well-being, our safety to? Have we anchored ourselves to our family doctor? If so, what happens when our doctor is wrong, when they have prescribed medication and treatment and it doesn’t work? What happens when your doctor doesn’t know what to do? What if we’ve anchored ourselves to certain politicians or political parties? What happens when that person leaves office? When they change their stance on an issue that you yourself supported? When they do something wrong? Fail to uphold the promises they have made? What if we anchor ourselves to our family, but then our family falls apart, kids grow up and move away, you simply drift apart, people die? What if we anchor ourselves to our job or our savings account? What happens when the job goes away, when we can no longer do the job, when an unexpected catastrophe comes and wipes out your savings? If we lose these things, will we be swept away?

Life isn’t kind or fair to give you one thing to handle at a time. Sometimes the loss of these things hit us in quick succession, like the rushing and crashing waves of the ocean. If we have anchored ourselves, our identity, our happiness, our purpose to any of these things, then, when the waters of change rush towards you, you will be swept away with these things that you anchored yourself to. This makes us afraid.

God never promises that we will get to keep all these things that we may have anchored ourselves to: family, friends, doctors, politicians, jobs, etc. He actually promises that we will pass through rivers of rushing waters. We will get wet because life is a splash zone. The changing waters of life will pound us with their immense power. We will have suffering. Things will be taken from us. Will you be swept away when it happens?

But God promises more than rushing waters of life. He says, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.” (verse 2) I’ll protect you through all the things that rush at you, trying to sweep you away. I did this for my people as I led them out of Egypt on the dry ground of the Red Sea between two walls of rushing waters. As you are anchored to me, do not fear the rushing waters of life.

Why no fear? Because “this is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.’” (verse 1) God made you, and he saved you. He redeemed you - a fancy word meaning that he bought you from the things that once held you down. He bought you from sin, death, and the devil.

How? “Because I love you, I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.” (verse 4b) He gave people in exchange for you, namely one person – Jesus Christ. His life was substituted for yours. He lived with the complete obedience and perfection that God demands. He then gave up his life on the cross to pay for the entire debt of all our sins combined to buy us from what holds us down and tries to drown us – sin, death, and the devil. As Jesus said in our Gospel reading today: “Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die. (John 12:31-33)

Jesus’ life was given in place of ours to buy us back from the devil. God drew you to himself with this message. He summoned you by name at your baptism, when he made you a part of his family in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. On that day, he used water not to sweep you away into judgment, but to powerfully wash you clean of all of your sins, all that tries to drag you down and drown you. Christ’s life was put over yours. He covers you. You belong to God, wearing Jesus’ perfection. And so his promise is: “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” (verse 5)

Things will come rushing at us like waters and they wash things from our lives out to sea from us. Does that, though, give us a right to be afraid – afraid of your family failing you, leaving you, afraid of failing health, of failing leaders, afraid of failing financial or job security? God says no. Why? Hear his promise again: “This is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine... Do not be afraid, for I am with you.” (verses 1,5a) God is our anchor in life, the one who holds us fast to himself while all the changes and the losses of life come rushing at us. He will not let us be swept away or drown.

As our anchor, God will gather all of us together. He would do this for the people in Isaiah’s day. Yes, the violence of war would strip away their Temple, their city, even their families. They would be swept out to sea metaphorically to another country. But God would not let them be swept away from him. He calls them precious and loved. As their anchor, he promised to bring them all together again. “I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth— everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” (verses 5b-7) The Israelites did not remain washed out to sea. God brought them back to Jerusalem. For those who didn’t come back when the Jews were able to return to Jerusalem, God ultimately fulfilled his pledge by bringing them back together in the heavenly home he had prepared for them.

Sometimes we are afraid that the rushing waters of life will sweep everything away from us, even our God. But he is our anchor. He sticks with us. He holds us strong that the waters will not sweep us away. Then he brings all his precious children back together. It may not be here, like the Israelites in Isaiah’s day, but it will certainly be in heaven. He will do this because he has given Jesus, his one and only Son, in exchange for all our lives. Nothing will sweep you away from God while he is your anchor.

Anchored to God, how will you live your life with no fear of being swept away? What will it change for you? How will you live differently each day? What attitude will you have? What confidence will you share with others?

Have this message on your hearts and minds every day: “This is what the LORD says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.’” (verse 1) So we do not fear that the rushing waters of life will ever sweep us away because we are anchored to God. Amen.