

Imagine for a minute that you're one of the Jewish people living in Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Life has been getting progressively more difficult. Ten years ago your king Jehoiachin and his family were exiled by the Babylonians and their king, Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle was installed by the Babylonians as governor and things were ok for a while, but then the Babylonians became unhappy with Zedekiah and laid siege to the city, setting it aflame, destroying the temple and sending all the survivors—including you—into exile.

You've lost your home, you've lost members of your extended family, you've been forced to leave and all that you have left is what you've been able to carry out—another robe, some food, a few pots and pans.

And Jerusalem wasn't just your home; it's the place God gave you and your people. It's the place that so long ago God promised Abraham. It's the place that God brought the Israelites to after freeing them from the Egyptians and leading them through the wilderness. It's God's chosen place for God's chosen people. God gave you this place, how is it possible anyone can send you away from it?

Where is God in the midst of all this? Has God been destroyed by the gods of the Babylonians? Is Marduk—chief among Babylonian gods—a more powerful than the God of Israel?

Is this punishment? Were we that bad? Is this the price we pay for daring to consider other gods? Is this what happens because we neglected the widows and the orphans?

So that's where your thoughts are, God is either defeated—powerless—unequal to the challenges of this particular time, or God is just gone, so disappointed in us that God has left us all together.

In the midst of these troubling thoughts, Isaiah prophesies this word from God:

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.

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.”

God is not gone. God is not defeated. Even as we have felt like we are drowning God has been there, just as God was there when the Israelites made it through the Red Sea, just as God was there at the beginning of the world, defeating the powers of chaos and bringing order out of the face of the deep.

God is not gone. God is not defeated. Even as Jerusalem was burning, even as we walked through that fire, we were not burned, we were not consumed. God was with us. God *is* with us. And more than that even, we are precious in God's sight, honored and loved.

God is not gone. God is not defeated.

We don't struggle so much with waters and rivers that threaten to overwhelm us, or fire that seems like it will consume us. We haven't been driven from our homes. But if you are about to lose a job, or have already lost one, it might seem like you're drowning.

Or if you struggle with illness or chronic disease, it may seem like fire threatens to consume. Or if you struggle in relationship, or with family members, or with a grievous loss, it may seem like the waters are about to overwhelm you.

So these words, spoken by God through Isaiah at a particular time in history to a certain group of people have meaning to all of God's people throughout history and they have meaning to each of us gathered here today.

Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine.

A beautiful claim. A claim we can cling to for the whole of our lives, and most especially in those times that are darkest. A claim that for each of us is acknowledged and made visible in the water of our baptism. The baptism that we remember and recommit to on this day that we celebrate Jesus' baptism.

In our gospel text, we hear Luke's account of Jesus' baptism.

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...

Interestingly enough, Luke doesn't describe the baptism the way that Mark and Matthew do. There's no dialogue between John and Jesus. Jesus simply joins in with all the other people. Jesus steps into line with the gathered sinners, standing in solidarity with them—and with us—in our collective brokenness. There at his baptism he identified with all those coming to look for a new way, all those searching for a word of forgiveness and hope. And following his baptism he prayed and he heard God's claim.

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

Jesus hears that claim that echoes the words of Isaiah 43. God's promise to love. A claim that each of us experience in our baptism, a claim to which all of us can cling our whole lives.

And I mean all of us. It's comforting to sit in the pew and hear these words and to be strengthened by the reminder that God loves me and God is with me. That can give each of us a warm feeling that can hold us through the day and maybe even the week. But I was reminded this week that the claim is not just for me. That claim is not mine alone.

I had occasion to be in conversation with a woman who I knew had recently had a baby. In the course of our conversation, this woman told me that she had stopped going to her church. When I asked why, the story unfolded. It turns out that she had the baby with a man she has been seeing, but that they were not yet married. The couple went to the small group that they belonged to at their church—a small group he had been a part of for quite some time—and they explained what had happened, asked for forgiveness and asked for the group's support. Sadly, the group did not offer that support, but instead asked the couple to leave, feeling that if they let them stay in the group, they would be condoning their actions.

The group identified a sin, a sin that was presumably ongoing, and they drew a line in the sand, a line that left them on one side and this couple on the other side. Presumably the sides on that line defined sinners and non-sinners. Or maybe really bad sinners and not-so-bad sinners. Or more likely, repentant sinners and unrepentant sinners.

Whichever are the defining criteria for sides of the line, I see it not as a righteous judgment that seeks to call the sinful from their broken ways, but rather, as an opportunity lost.

Now it's easy to look at this particular situation and critique these folks that we don't know for doing something that we can be sure we would never do. But of course, the risk in doing that is that we end up in the same place as the small group members, drawing a line that has us on one side and them on the other.

It's all too easy to look at the sins of others, especially those that are more public, more obvious, maybe even more of a taboo and say to ourselves, I'm not that bad. I've haven't done anything like that, I'd never do something like that. It's the same impulse that sees a story of a house fire and wants to find its cause. I would never do that, my house isn't like that, so a fire like that can't happen to me. We want to know we're safe. We want to know we're ok, and all too often we define that by separating ourselves from others who fall on the other side of whatever line we might draw.

But what I hear in today's gospel text is that Jesus joins the line of sinners, looking for a way to be made clean. Which comes as no surprise, right? Because Jesus is always hanging with the sinners, with the tax collectors, with the prostitutes. Wherever the line has been drawn, it's clear that Jesus stands on the other side with those who have been excluded, labeled and judged. Jesus is with those whose sins are obvious, public and taboo. Jesus is with all those we want to label as worse than us, those we want to label as other.

And why? Because, just as God has claimed us, loved us and called us precious, so God has called *all* of God's people as claimed, loved and precious.

So as you remember that claim in the baptismal remembrance we will do shortly, remember that claim not just for your sake, but also for the sake of those with whom you struggle the most. Remember it not only in your own life, but also in the lives of those

who our society and our community would put on the other side of the line. Because the truth is, God loves us all, and God sent Jesus, not only so that we might see what a life that draws no lines looks like in this world, but more importantly, so that through him we might be given the strength to live that way ourselves, and the forgiveness we so desperately need when we fail.

Identifying the sins of others is not a righteous judgment that seeks to call others from their broken ways. Instead, all too often, it's a line drawn that separates us from them. And even more than that, it's an opportunity lost. An opportunity to see that that person, or group of people stand with Jesus—and when we reach out in love we love, not just them, but Jesus as well.