

Hearing Love Underwater: Luke 3:21-22, Isaiah 43:1-7

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In early December, I was driving my daughter to day care when pop radio caught me by surprise. The radio was basically on as background noise, to lull the baby to sleep. And then suddenly a woman's soulful voice sang out words that, for a moment, mediated God's voice of love to me. *You say I am loved, she sang, when I can't feel a thing. You say I am strong, when I think I am weak. You say I am held when I am falling short. When I don't belong, oh, you say I am yours.* Perhaps you recognize the song. It's called "You Say," by Lauren Daigle, and it's one of the rare contemporary Christian pieces that has crossed over to become a Top 40 hit.

I wasn't expecting pop radio to deliver a message about being loved by God, much less one that was compelling to me. But, I had just been here in Springfield a couple weeks, and I suppose in the midst of trying to balance a new job and a new place and a new baby, I was feeling a little *weak*, a little like I was *falling short*. I needed a reminder that I was loved by God.

Now I could find a few things in Daigle's song to critique. Perhaps it presumes a life of privilege where the primary barrier to faith is *not feeling it*. Perhaps it compartmentalizes God's powerful love into a sound bite meant to be heard in the isolation of one's commute. And yet, there's a reason that people like this song: on some level we are all yearning to hear that we are loved. Whether the barrier to believing this is middle-class apathy, our society's deep injustice, or personal grief, the world is constantly finding ways to separate us from our core identity as God's beloved.

Fortunately, God keeps speaking back. "You are my Son, the beloved," the Spirit says to Jesus at his baptism, and to all who have been baptized into Christ. And through the prophet Isaiah: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Our invitation today is simply to hear these words.

Of course, to the world-weary among us, to the cynical or the hardened or the busy, that is easier said than done. When I was a kid, my friends and I had a game we played at the swimming pool. We would submerge ourselves and try to communicate underwater. Like a game of telephone, we'd attempt to share song lyrics or silly phrases. Of course, we couldn't really understand each other through the distorting effect of the water, and we relished the hilarious misunderstandings.

But if there's a message you really need, then hearing underwater is not funny. It's frustrating. When God tells us we are beloved, sometimes it feels like we're underwater, hearing these words in a cloudy echo, unable to make them out. Maybe it's because we're preoccupied with all the things we have to do to please God and other and keep our lives going. Or maybe the message of God's love has been cheapened by too many hallmark cards. The phrase "God loves you" can seem no different than a canned, sentimental self-care mantra: *Think positive. Believe in yourself*. Or maybe pain and grief have gotten in the way. What do assurances of God's love mean,

anyhow, in this broken world? What does it mean to be beloved, if the one who loves you stands by silently in your hour of pain?

The first hearers of Isaiah's words might have asked similar questions. Isaiah 43 is preached to a people who have been through a long and deadly siege in Jerusalem, a forced march across miles of desert to Babylon, and now a whole generation living in exile as laborers for a foreign power. Just before this passage, in Isaiah 42, the prophet describes Israel as a people who have been robbed, plundered, trapped, imprisoned. "Who gave us up to the robbers?" the prophet cries out. "Was it not the Lord?" God seems to be more the source of hurt than the source of love.

But now, there are whispers of a power shift and a chance to go home to Jerusalem. Now, after sin and repentance, after grief and exhaustion, the exiles are longing to hear a new word. To be reminded that the truest thing about them is not their history of destruction, not their status as strangers in a foreign land, not their sin. The truest thing about them is that they are people of God—created, named, claimed, loved.

"But now," Isaiah begins, signaling something new. "But now, do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name and you are mine." If we're hearing this as exiles, perhaps we start to find hope in this message from God. "When you pass through the waters," God continues, "I will be with you."

This is all very nice, but we've been through so much, and we're still a little skeptical. "Don't worry, I'm with you" is just the kind of empty blather that doesn't change a thing. "I'm with you in prayer!" someone can easily send as a text, and then forget about you the next moment. As the prophet continues, though, we begin to realize that for God these are not empty words. *Through the waters, through rivers, through fire, through flame*, God insists. *I have been there and I will be there again.*

God isn't just offering thoughts and prayers. God is literally with us. Throughout the Bible, throughout history, throughout our lives, God puts God's body in the midst of the water and the fire. When the people came out of Egypt and were cornered at the edge of the Red sea, God's Spirit led them safely as they passed through the water. When some of God's servants in Babylon were set to be burned in a furnace for their refusal to worship the gods of the land, an angel of God got into the furnace with them. And, to flash forward: when Christ who knew no sin came to live among us, he who did not need to repent got down in the river and went under the waters of baptism because that's where we are, too. The exiles can hear these words and know that when they were watching Jerusalem go up in flames, when they were toiling alongside the river in Babylon, God had not abandoned them.

Put another way, God's display of love goes beyond the level of encouraging words and random acts of kindness. There is a costliness to God's love. Listen for all the economic terms used in the passage. God *redeems* the people. God pays a *ransom* for their freedom. Israel is *precious*, worth a great price. God is so devoted to bringing Israel back to freedom that God will pay any price, even giving up Egypt or Cush or Seba *in exchange*.

It's almost disturbing, the shocking and incredible particularity of God's love for this one people. This is the same God who, like a shepherd, leaves the ninety-nine sheep to chase after the one. For this moment, God is abandoning all others to focus on the great love for the people of Israel.

As a new parent, I've thought a lot about this particularity. For a time, it feels that I have to *exchange* many loves, many relationships, many priorities, in order to be fully present to the one child. Ultimately, my hope is that this one deep and particular love leads not to a narrowing, but gives me a deeper appreciation and awareness for *all* the parents, all the babies, all those who are anxious about a beloved, all those who long to be held or nourished. My hope is that this one deep and particular love helps cultivate deeper love for all.

Certainly for God, Israel is not the end of the story. For a time, God breathes love and life into this one people, with an end design of blessing all the nations. For a time, other nations seem to pay the price, but ultimately, it is not Egypt or any other nation who will bear the cost of redeeming God's people. It is God's own self, come to be among us in Christ, to go under the waters of baptism and into death for the sake of God's people.

And in Christ, the particular love of the covenant is extended to all of us. We, like the exiles in Israel, may receive these words as spoken directly to us. We are loved. We belong to God. God would go to any length, pay any price, to walk with us in our pain, to redeem us from places of captivity, of grief, of guilt. We may receive these words as spoken quite specifically to us.

And yet, we cannot stop there. The word of belovedness is not spoken *only* to you or to me. It is spoken to a whole community.

This is where we Americans need a little help, because the English language uses the same word, *you*, for a group or for individuals. Sometimes we forget that in most of the Scripture, God speaks to communities.

Luckily, John Dyer, a dean at Dallas Theological Seminary, created a smartphone app to help us out. It's called "Texas Bible." Anytime the Bible addresses a community rather than an individual, Dyer's app changes the English translation from "you" to the Texan "y'all."

"For I know the plans I have for y'all," reads Jeremiah 29:11, reminding us that this familiar and comforting verse does not belong to the individual alone. And if you're not a southerner or you just don't like the word y'all, you have other options—the Chicago/New York version reads "you'se guys" and the Pittsburgh version reads "yinz," as in, "Do yinz not know that yinz are God's temple and God's Spirit dwells in yinz." (1 Cor 3:16).

Isaiah 43 describes God's shockingly particular love, but it's meant to be heard by a whole community: "I have called y'all by name and y'all are mine." To the Israelites hearing this message in exile, this would be a reminder that the message was not for them alone, but for the whole of God's people. "I will bring your offspring from the east," God says, "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.'"

That is, God's people flung *everywhere* are to hear this message. The ones who were exiled to Babylon in the north, yes. But also the ones who had remained in Israel to the south, mostly as peasant farmers in a crippled colonial economy, living out a very different reality. North, south, east, west. *Everyone* of these is called by God's name and created for God's glory and precious and beloved to God.

"But wait," the exiles in Babylon may have been tempted to say, "we are the ones who suffered the most, the ones who kept worshipping and listening to God's word. Aren't we the primary ones God is speaking to? After all *we've* been through, can't *we* keep this word of love for ourselves? Can't we huddle in close and have a moment?" We know from the ensuing history that when they were finally gathered back together in Jerusalem, there was in fact tension between the exiles and those who had remained in Judah. Whether 2500 years ago or today, apparently it's in human nature to try and claim God's favor for our own.

But the words of God's love aren't to be heard in isolation by any individual or group. They are to be heard in community. We can't clutch them for ourselves even in hard times, for then we aren't hearing them fully. The words of love God speaks are for the whole people of God—north, south, east and west, exiled and not exiled, skilled and unskilled, educated and uneducated. The words of love God speaks to us in the church today are, by Christ's coming, for the whole church: the ones who come every week, and the ones who don't; the ones who stand in the front singing and proclaiming, and the ones who slip into the back pew and out again without a word; the ones who have never had trouble believing in God's love and the ones who wrestle with it every day; the straight ones who have always been told they belong, and the queer ones who have been told for too long that they weren't a part of this people. The message of being beloved is for the whole of God's people. If you can't hear it alongside all of this people, you're not really hearing it at all.

Yes, the word of love comes to us in community, and that also means this: that when you are too far under the water to understand the words of love, you have others beside you to listen, and hold your hand, and communicate it to you in ways large and small, in word and deed. Until that day when the waves settle and you come up from the river baptized into a new reality, and you hear for yourself the Spirit's voice of love.

Try to hear it now, O people of God, for yourself and for your neighbor:

You all are mine. You all are precious: worth any price. You all are my beloved.