

“Ever Been Homesick?”

Isaiah 43:1-7

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Have you ever been homesick? I am confident most of us have and know what a miserable feeling it can be. It is one thing to be separated from family and friends for a period of time, knowing you will one day be reunited. It is entirely different when returning home seems impossible.

This was the setting for today's text because it was written to a people living in exile. Life as they had known it had been turned upside down by the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem, leading to a level of despair they had never experienced.

You recall there were two invasions of Jerusalem. In the attack of 597 BCE, the Babylonians did not destroy the temple or the city, but took control of it. They deported three thousand of Judah's finest citizens and officials, including the king and queen mother.

The next ten years was a time of upheaval in Jerusalem, even though the Babylonians allowed Zedekiah to serve as governor and interfered little in the affairs of the people. There was a strong faction in Jerusalem which wanted to completely throw off the Babylonian cloak, and they convinced Zedekiah to withhold the annual tribute to Babylon in 588 BCE.

The prophet, Jeremiah, warned Zedekiah not to do this and appealed to his friends and neighbors to quit being so antagonistic. They would not listen, however, and paid a high price for their stubbornness.

Nebuchadnezzar sent his army into Jerusalem to destroy the city. The beloved Temple, along with most of the homes and businesses were annihilated, and thousands more citizens were taken into captivity. Life as they had known it would never be the same.

You can imagine the mood of the captives in Babylon. The Jewish people were miserable. Despair and hopelessness were rampant.

It was in this context this passage was written. It is a part of a larger body of material referred to as second or *Deutero Isaiah*, chapters 40-55.

The book of Isaiah is comprised of three units of material written over two hundred years. Isaiah 1-39 was written by a prophet one hundred fifty years earlier than our text. He spoke out against the injustice and idolatry of Judah and Jerusalem shortly before the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 721 BCE. Isaiah 56-66, or third Isaiah, was written after Persia, under the command of Cyrus, overthrew the Babylonians in 539 BCE and released the captives to return to Jerusalem.

This means our text was written while the storm was raging. It was as if the people were swimming in raging flood waters or fighting an out-of-control fire. Despair and hopelessness were at their peak.

So, what message did God send through the prophet to the homesick Jewish captives?

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. **I have called you by name, and you are mine.** When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned, and the flame will not consume you. I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior” Isaiah 43:1-3a.

“**I have called you by name, and you are mine.**” There is a part of every text which captures my attention more than others. This is the part which intrigued me the most last week as I pondered it. I cannot tell you how many times it came to mind.

Think about how this must have sounded to these homesick captives. They were surrounded by people who did not know their names, their families, their stories, their accomplishments, their challenges, their interests, their passions, their dreams, their fears, their wounds or their worries. For the most part, they were forgettable faces who did not belong in Babylon and were not connected to anyone who called Babylon home.

“**I have called you by name, and you are mine.**” God knew what they needed to hear, didn't He? He knew their names, everyone of them. He knew their stories, what they were proud of and what worried them. He knew about their struggles and challenges and their feelings of despair which accompanied them.

Like a loving parent, God would never forget or abandon them. God used the prophet to speak directly to their fears and frustrations, offering words of comfort and hope. Wherever they were, God was with them, eager to hear their prayers and assure them of His unending love. He would strengthen them on their journey through the power of His Spirit.

Furthermore, as Mercer University professor, Dr. Colin Harris points out, God would use their suffering to teach them lessons about life and faith, especially their covenant with God, which they could not have understood any other way. “It is only when they lost what they could

not keep that they found what they could not lose,” Harris writes. How true this is for us, as well.

More than any other prophet, Second Isaiah magnified Yahweh as Creator. The verb, *to create*, appears sixteen times in chapters 40-55. Compare this to the fact this verb occurs only once in Isaiah 1-39 and only eleven times in the book of Genesis.

What was the writer’s point? Each one of them was a child of God, and God would be more faithful to them than they were their own children. They could rest assured that God knew them, loved them and would never forsake them.

This is why second Isaiah is so personal. First Isaiah was written to the nation as a whole, exhorting the leaders and the people to repent of their selfish ways and pursue justice and peace; second Isaiah was written as a love letter to suffering children, encouraging them not to give up or lose hope. They might have lost their homes and businesses, but not God who gave them life and called them to this magnificent faith journey. This God would have the final word in their lives, and it would be good. This had to give them hope and lift their spirits.

“I have called you by name, and you are mine.” What impact could these words have upon you today? What struggles and challenges are you facing which have made you fearful and anxious? What new roads are you traveling down which are taking you farther and farther away from familiar places and people? Do you think these words could give you courage and hope and lift your spirits, too? I certainly believe they could.

What needs to happen for you to hear these comforting and reassuring words?

Perhaps you need to listen to a prophet God has sent your way as He did the Israelites in exile, or you need to spend more time with God in prayer, unburdening your heart and letting Him speak to you. Maybe you need to sit in God’s lap like a restless child does a loving parent and let Him hold you.

When journalist Dan Rather interviewed Mother Teresa years ago, he asked her, “When you pray, what do you say to God?” She simply replied, “I don’t say anything; I sit and listen.”

“What does God say to you,” Rather asked Mother Teresa? “Nothing at first; God listens, too. If you don’t understand this, I can’t explain it to you.”

This week, why not try what Mother Teresa so often did. It sure seemed to work for her.

“I have called you by name and you are mine.” Who is God using to speak to you in your darkest hour? Who is calling your name on God’s behalf? Who wants to love you like God does and give you hope today?

I hope you will open your life to them and listen. You may just hear the very voice of God.

“I have called you by name and you are mine.” Who needs you to be God’s voice in their life this week? Who needs you to call their name to let them know they have not been abandoned?

Who is going through a tough time and needs to be encouraged? Who needs to know they are not alone as they struggle? Who needs to know you care about them?

Who is feeling as if they don’t matter anymore? Who is not as active or productive as they once were and feels forgotten?

Who is growing weary with a chronic illness and needs a reason to fight another day?

Who is searching for a better job and needs someone to pray with them?

Whose marriage is on the rocks and needs some good advice?

Whose child is going down the wrong path, creating unbearable tension and strife in their home and needs to hear words of hope?

Who has taken on a new challenge and needs encouragement because they are struggling with fears of inadequacy?

Who is exhausted because they have a new baby and need to be asked how they are doing and what they need?

Who is battling depression or anger or grief and needs a friend who will listen to their story?

“I have called you by name, and you are mine.” Isn’t this what faith really is? I think so. It is the assurance that I am not alone and never will be. I have not been forgotten or abandoned. I am not on my own.

Isn’t this what faith does? Yes, it builds community, helping us make circles of friends.

Do you need this kind of faith today? Do you long to hear God whisper these words in your ear? Do you yearn for this kind of relationship with God? I am confident God wants this, too. Listen carefully as God calls your name and let Him into your life.

Do you need to be a part of a faith community where you are surrounded by people who call you by name and walk along side you on your journey? Do you need to be in a church

and a Sunday school class where you can call friends by name and encourage them when they are struggling?

If so, I invite you to this warm and friendly church where you will find people who will call you by name, listen to your story, pray with you and offer words of encouragement to you. Come walk with us so you will never feel alone in exile.