

**Ash Wednesday**  
**February 18, 2015**  
**Isaiah 41:14-16**

***“Singing with the Exiles: God Has a Word for That”***

In worship this past Sunday, the Transfiguration of Our Lord, we were blessed to hear that hauntingly beautiful closing hymn, “Farewell to Alleluia.” Singing this each year has become near and dear to the hearts of many as we prepare for the Lenten season when Alleluia is absent from worship. One of the stanzas of that 11<sup>th</sup>-century hymn stated:

*Alleluia thou resoundest, True Jerusalem and free;  
Alleluia, joyful mother, All thy children sing with thee;  
But by Babylon’s sad waters Mourning exiles now are we.*

“But by Babylon’s sad waters mourning exiles now are we.” What’s it like to be an exile? In thinking about today’s message, I wondered how many of our ESL students would be considered exiles? Words like mass deportation, refugee camps, displacement, separation, post-traumatic stress disorder – all of these things can be part of the exile experience to leave one’s life and home and start over in a new and strange place. In our midweek Lenten worship this year, we will be focusing on a theme entitled “Singing with the Exiles,” based on the prophet Isaiah’s record of the experience of the exiles from Jerusalem and Judea in Babylon found in chapters 40-55 of his book. And not just their experience, but also God’s gracious promise of hope and a future that sustained them. On this Ash Wednesday, as we begin our 40-day Lenten journey, we hear the Word of the Lord from Isaiah 41:14-16 (read text). The message for this day is entitled, “God Has a Word for That.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

God’s chosen people were strangers in a strange land; their homeland, city and temple destroyed by the mighty Babylonian war machine in the early years of the sixth century B.C. God’s people were paralyzed, hopeless and unable to move forward. Relocated hundreds of miles to the east, they now lived on the Babylonian plain. And they had serious questions: Is God for real? If yes, how could he allow this to happen? Does he really care for us? These are questions that most exiles will ask themselves; in fact, people who have not been exiles but have undergone pain and suffering often ask these same questions. How does a person make sense of this in order to be whole once again?

Here in Isaiah 41, God calls the exiled community in Babylon a worm (41:14) – not a very complimentary term. But He who is our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, transforms worms into mountain movers (41:15). And there is a word for that – grace!

First off, nobody aspires to be a worm – a worm wannabe. Ever hear of a sports team by that name? How about the Washington Worms? I don’t think so. But that is what God calls his chosen people here. Hadn’t they been through enough already? Buried under the boot of Babylon, here in Isaiah 40-55 the exiles are called weak and weary, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, deaf and blind, a stubborn rebel from birth. In short, God has a word for that: worm. But what about us today? Are we weak and weary in following the Lord and living as his chosen people today? Are we deaf and blind to God’s will and purpose for our lives today? Are we that stubborn rebel who refuses to take correction from our heavenly Father, choosing instead that “my will be done?” Are we more worm than we thought? The answer is a resounding yes! And that is why the Lenten season is so important. It is a prime opportunity for us to see ourselves for what we really are, confess our sins – the evil we have done and the good we have failed to do, and **“return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love”** (Joel 2:13). Only worms who are buried in the ground, surrounded by dirt, can cry out for resurrection and new life!

So how do worms get transformed into mountain movers? Only through him who says, **“I am the One who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel”** (Isaiah 41:14). These two titles – Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – are here joined together. “Redeemer” is a rich word in the Old Testament, and it means a next-of-kin relative who buys back your inheritance, frees you from slavery, and pays off your debt. This is someone who comes near to us, who intervenes in order to help. The Holy One of Israel is that transcendent and mysterious God who is completely set apart; different from everyone and everything else. In Jesus, Redeemer and Holy One of Israel are joined together in order to accomplish God’s mission: **“For our sake [God] made him [Jesus] to be sins, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”** (1 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus became our next-of-kin relative to buy back our lost inheritance, free us from the slavery of sin, and pay off with his own blood the debt we owed but could never pay. Only the Holy One of Israel could offer his very life as payment that would suffice for God’s justice. And in shedding his own blood, Jesus was nailed to the tree of the cross, his body a bent, bloody, and twisted mess. Jesus was mocked, ridiculed and abandoned by his Father on the cross. God has a word for that: worm. Jesus became a worm for us! Our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, became a worm for us.

Lowly worms like you and me become mountain movers through our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Isaiah 41:15-16 tell us that what is lowly and despised is transformed by God: **“Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountain and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff; you shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them.”** Obstacles and impediments that seem insurmountable to us – the mountains and hills in life that stand opposed to the coming of God’s kingdom – are ground down and worn away by the power of our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, who is at work in us worms. They get blown away by the wind. And the net effect of this? **“And you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory.”** God has a word for all of this: grace! It is God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense (G-R-A-C-E) that transforms worms into mountain movers. It is God’s riches at Christ’s expense that transforms our Lenten ashes into Easter garlands. It is God’s riches at Christ’s expense that transforms the sackcloth of mourning over sin to baptismal robes washed clean in the blood of Jesus. And that is why we are singing with the exiles because Easter is coming! Suffering and death must give way to resurrection and new life in our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel. Amen.