

Lenten Midweek 1 • February 25, 2015

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 43:1-7

“Singing with the Exiles: He Only Has Eyes for You”

I remember a brief story that I heard years ago, back when I was in grade school. It was about a boy who had a toy sailboat. He loved that boat. He built it himself, rigging the little sails, attaching a rudder to the hull, and sealing it well so that it could float on the water. He named it, of course, because every proper ship needs a name. He painted the boat by hand with beautiful colors and – as a finishing touch – even signed his name on the deck. And once he was done, he took it out and let it sail in the small lake at a park near his home.

The sailboat was a thing of beauty, bobbing up and down on the waves, with the sun shining down on it, bringing out the colors the boy had given it. The boy beamed with joy. He would take it out day after day, letting it sail as sailboats are meant to do. One, though, the sailboat got caught up in a strong breeze that drove it away from the boy and around a bend of the lake. The boat sailed right into a stream that flowed out of the lake.

Pushed by the current and the wind, the little sailboat capsized and hit some rocks, ultimately running ashore a good ways away from the lake and the boy – and right at someone else’s feet. The man who found the boat noticed the skill that had gone into creating it, so he took it back to the shop that he owned and put it up for sale.

A short time later, the boy who built the boat came into the shop. Instantly, it caught his eye and he smiled, knowing that he’d found the boat that he loved so much. The shopkeeper saw the boy’s interest and immediately recognized an opportunity to make a deal... even if the boy’s name was right there on the deck of the boat. Once the boy heard how much the shopkeeper wanted, he went home and emptied his bank. Taking everything he had, he returned to the shop and bought back his boat, even though he shouldn’t have had to: he was the one who built it, the one who beautified it, and the one who loved it. He valued it that much.

The boy brought his sailboat home and got right to work on restoring it. He repaired the damage done by wind and wave and rock until it was as good as new. The boy was glad – despite the high price he had to pay – because his little boat was back with him. It was where it was meant to be.

God loved His people Israel even more than that boy loved his sailboat.

Babylon looked at the Hebrew exiles and said, “You’re nothing in my eyes.” The people of Israel were strangers in a strange land, now merely laborers and state slaves under the Babylonian Empire. The land in which they had based their identity and value as a nation had been taken from them. As far as the world was concerned, they were worthless.

Where do you find your value? How do you determine how much you’re worth? Looking to the world around us, we might hear what the Hebrews heard, “You’re nothing in my eyes.” Compared to the seeming perfection promoted by publicists and marketers, none of us are currently attractive enough, fit enough, fed enough, happy enough, or wealthy enough to have any real value. And when you don’t feel like you’ve got any value, your view of the world changes to match that feeling. It can start to pound on you like wind and wave and rock. It can batter you about and leave you feeling lost and hurt, even so that you start treating other people like they aren’t worth anything, either.

Here’s the thing, though: your ultimate value isn’t based in how the world views you. Like the boy with his little sailboat, you can see your value in the eyes of the one who created you and loves you. You can see it in the price He’d pay to restore you.

Yahweh’s message to the Hebrew exiles through the prophet Isaiah gives us an idea of how much He valued them. God created them and chose them to be His own. He gave them everything, even bringing them out of Egypt through the waters of the sea and through the Jordan River to establish them in the Promised Land. While His beloved people strayed from Him and ultimately were taken in exile to Babylon, God still remembered them. The story didn’t end in exile. We heard God’s promise that He would redeem His people and bring them back from that foreign land in which they’d been living.

What price would Yahweh pay to restore His people? As He says through Isaiah, He gives over mighty Egypt with its wealth and military power to ransom them, the exotic and far-off lands of Cush and Seba

He exchanges for them. Working through the Persian army, God would even upend Babylon and return the people of Israel to the Promised Land. God does all this, because each and every one of the people is precious in His eyes.

Yahweh values you, too. God has created you, giving you life, and not in some anonymous, general, or detached way. In this brief section of Isaiah 43, God continually uses the word you – not “you all,” but you, singularly. *You* are Yahweh’s beloved and prized belonging. He calls *you* by name. *You* are His. *You* are exceedingly valued: *you* are precious in His eyes! But God has more than just eyes for you.

He has hands and feet for you, nailed to a cross. He has a head for you, crowned with thorns. He has a side for you, thrust through by a spear.¹

But there’s more: God has a heart for you. God loves *you*. Throughout this season of Lent, remember that fact, so lavishly expressed here in Isaiah. You are valued by your Creator and Redeemer, who gives Himself for you, Who pays the steepest price to restore you.

Because of Yahweh’s love, at the end of the story, you’ll be where you were meant to be: with Him.

Amen.

¹ Thanks to Dr. Reed Lessing for this passage