

Midweek Lenten Service
March 4, 2015
Isaiah 44:1-5

“Singing with the Exiles: Marked”

Anybody here ever gotten a tattoo? Or wished they could, but have been prevented from doing so? Or wished they could get one removed? Tattoos have become much more mainstream in our culture than ever before. People use them now to memorialize loved ones, tell the world what’s important to them (including Scripture references or statements of faith), or just showcase a favorite design. Tattoos are as unique as each individual, but they all involve getting marked with something that, generally speaking, is pretty permanent. Some 800 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah wrote to his exiled people living in Babylon, and called on them to be marked with just one word: *leyahweh*, “belonging to Yahweh,” or as that verse from Isaiah 44 puts it: **“... and another will write on his hand, ‘The Lord’s,’ and name himself by the name of Israel.”** It is this concept of being marked as belonging to the Lord that we focus on this evening. Our midweek Lenten series, “Singing with the Exiles,” based on Isaiah 40-55 continues this evening under the theme, “Marked.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

The dominant story in Babylon was not the Lord God, but Marduk, the chief god in the pantheon of Babylon. The very name, “Babylon” (*Bab-ilu*) in the Akkadian language means “gate of the gods,” and everything in the capital city of Babylon was in honor of Marduk. With every passing year that the Judean exiles spent here, Marduk seemed more powerful and the Lord more incidental. Babylon started to feel more like home. God’s people were in danger of getting sucked up into this, forgetting who they really were! Besides all this, the Babylonians had a serious identity transformation program of changing people’s names. Just ask Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah. Don’t know who they are? You probably know them by their Babylonian names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (see Daniel 1:7). These are the three young men, exiles from Judah and Jerusalem, who are chosen to serve the king of Babylon, and who eventually get thrown into the fiery furnace. The goal of this program was to mark the Judean exiles with a new name that would entice them into embracing a new Babylonian identity and faith, abandoning their former identity and way of life. There would be financial gain by blending in and conforming with Babylonian customs and religion. Pragmatists among the Judean exiles decided to go with the flow. You know, “when in Rome (or Babylon), do as the Romans (or Babylonians) do.” Besides, what was to be gained from being stuck in a culture where your faith stories and liturgies were mocked and dismissed as irrelevant?

Enter Isaiah and his words reminding the resident aliens of Judah and Jerusalem who they really were and to whom they really belonged! **“But now hear, O Jacob My servant, Israel whom I have chosen! Thus says the Lord who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob My servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen.”** They have an identity already, one given to them not by man but by God! That name “Jeshurun” (see Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:5, 26) is linked with the Hebrew verb *yashar*, meaning “to be straight or upright.” The two names of Jeshurun and Jacob are paralleled here. Remember that Jacob means “deceiver,” “liar,” “trickster.” The Lord God knows his people’s identity as both deceiver and liar, but He is able to make them upright and straight. And if that was true with the exiles in Babylon then, it is true for us today also. At our core, we are Jacob: deceiving and lying to God, others and ourselves. But by God’s amazing grace, we are also Jeshurun: made straight and upright through the One whose body was marked with the scars of suffering: spear, nails and crown of thorns. Even in his resurrected body, He is known by these holy marks of suffering love – all for us and for our salvation.

The danger for the people of Isaiah's day is the same danger that we face today: forgetting who we are and whose we are; abandoning our heritage and faith for fleeting power and prestige that are here today and gone tomorrow; getting so caught up in the current culture, in whatever is the "next big thing," that we are willing to sacrifice ourselves in order to fit in. And so like the people of Isaiah's day, so we also must be reminded of our true identity. Here in Isaiah 44, the movement is from water to streams to Spirit, climaxing in the Lord's blessing. If that isn't Baptismal imagery, I don't know what is! In the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, we are marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit for life eternal. In the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, we are given a new identity as God's chosen and beloved children, clothed in the robe of Christ's own righteousness. In the cleansing waters of holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in his presence (see Isaiah 11:12). In holy Baptism, we are branded with this phrase: "Property of the Lord!" And so, by God's rich grace poured out in Jesus, we are a "chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" (1 Peter 2:9).

Strange as it may sound, God has always marked his story on his people's bodies. Very early on, God marked Cain so he would not be destroyed after he killed his own brother, Abel (Genesis 4:15). The Lord gave Abraham and his offspring the covenant mark of circumcision (Genesis 17). Before entering the Promised Land, God called upon his people to bind his Word upon their foreheads and upon their hands (Deuteronomy 6:8). We stand in a long line of people who have gone before us who are marked as that which belongs to the Lord. And so we are. May this Lenten season sharpen our faith and deepen our trust in that One to whom we belong as we join our voices in singing with the exiles. Thanks be to God. Amen.