

You Are Mine: A Love Note
Isaiah 43:1-7

*When you walk through the fire, you won't be scorched
and flame won't burn you.*

Last week almost a thousand homes in Boulder County, Colorado were destroyed by a wind-whipped wildfire.

*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you.*

The recent flooding in western Washington has led to the president approving on Thursday a major disaster declaration for our area.

Flood and fire happen. They're happening much more often in the face of global warming. They affect lives with tragic results.

The Divine doesn't promise escape *from* life's devastations.

The Divine promises presence *through* them. *Because you are precious in my eyes...and I love you.*

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This part of Isaiah was written while the Jews were in exile, in Babylon, far from their homeland Israel and in the midst of daily uncertainty. They viewed themselves as to blame for their circumstances because they'd failed to follow God's laws. Cause and effect. Now they were facing the consequences.

I think about the recent fires and floods and how we've participated in global warming.

Not that natural disasters haven't always happened, but human actions have exacerbated them.

Similar with COVID: could we have somehow enabled more worldwide distribution of vaccines and done a better job of decreasing the political divides around this pandemic?

Cause and effect; facing the consequences.

I know progressive Christians don't like using the word, but this is sin, is it not? Missing the mark like those ancient Israelites realizing their actions had, at least partially, led them to exile and uncertainty.

And still God offered this message through the prophet:

*But now, says the Eternal—  
the one who created you...,  
the one who formed you...:  
Don't fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name; you are mine.*

This is the creator-of-all and redeemer-of-all in one intimate mix.

*I know you messed up. I know you're going through the flood and fire of that mess.  
And I'm with you. Not only that, I've redeemed you.*

In ancient times, being redeemed meant to be bought back<sup>i</sup> out of bondage into which one had to

sell themselves because of a debt. Leviticus 25 describes how a family member to whom that person belongs can redeem them from the situation they find themselves in.

God is the family member here in Isaiah 43, buying back God's beloveds. Redeeming them.

But even better—just beautiful to me—is this moment that is absolutely unique in scripture.

The voice of the Divine speaks to the people and says,  
*"I love you."*

Genesis to Revelation, this is the only time our holy texts use the Divine voice to speak those words to all of us: *"I love you."*

When Jesus is baptized in the Gospels we hear God's voice speak, *"this is my beloved,"*  
 and when Jesus is praying to Abba he prays, *"Then the world will know that you sent me  
 and that you have loved them just as you loved me,"*  
 and when the writer of the letter of First John describes God he writes, *"Dear  
 friends, let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves  
 is born from God and knows God... because God is love,"*  
 but **only here**, in this part of the prophet Isaiah, do we hear the voice of  
 God speaking directly to the people and saying those intimate,  
 unconditional, grace-filled words: *"I love you."*

What does it mean for you to know you are loved no matter what?  
 Whatever your situation? Whatever your reactions to your situation?

In this passage God is saying, "whatever your unfaithfulness that led you to exile does not define you. What defines you is that *you are mine.*"<sup>ii</sup> That's radical.

We talk about this concept of "belonging to God" most often when we are trying to express that no relationship, no government, no worldly power is above God—the biblical writers and early Christians used the words Lord and King and Father as a reminder that God is greater than those worldly rulers (lord & king & father).

But here! Here we're getting a different kind of reminder. Not only are we to look to the Divine as our teacher or guide for action, but we can also look to the Divine for love and a sense of belonging.

Our culture doesn't make a lot of space for us to say "I love you" to people other than our immediate family members. For some of us it can feel awkward when those words slip out.

This passage, coming just 9 days after I marked my 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary among you at First Congregational, gives an opportunity to say those words...aloud...to you...my people whom I love... taking God's example of how we relate to those we feel are "ours." "Our people."

You are my people.  
*You are precious in my sight...I love you.*

Whether you participate in Sunday worship or not.

Whether you find yourself disconnected from faith community in these times or more committed than ever.

Whether this is your first time tuning in or you've faltered through every one of our technical attempts from the beginning.

Whether we agree or disagree, whether you've been angry at some point of theology I've made or a message I failed to speak, or you don't care at all about my part in this ministry because you understand the church is the people and pastors come and go.

*You are precious in my sight...I love you.*

This pandemic has made it so, even though I pray through the church directory's names, I don't get to *see* you and know what's happening in your lives. And yet I still experience you as my people.

If you feel we are *your people*, too, what does that mean for you?

Are you praying for your community right now?

Are there individuals you want to reach out to to feel that connection tangibly?

And if right now you *aren't* feeling like this community is your people, that belonging isn't an important part of your spirit in this time, can that be okay for you?

And where *are* you finding the belonging and love that every child of God deserves?

This text encourages us to rediscover our deepest identity, our truest distinctiveness of belonging to the Divine.

*But now, says the Eternal—*

*the one who created you...,*

*the one who formed you...:*

*Don't fear, for I have redeemed you;*

*I have called you by name; you are mine.*

What does that belonging mean for you in the midst of flood or fire?

What does your belonging—to God and this community—mean as we start to walk through another year of pandemic?

What do you **want** it to mean?

*I* want to be able to say more often the words I love you—

and for that to be manifest in the ways we live our faith together as First Congregational Church.

I want our neighbors to have the sense *they* belong, too—

whether or not they worship among us sometimes

or even whether or not they call themselves Christian.

They belong. They are ours. Because they, too, are God's beloved.

And with one another, we are able to walk through the fire;

we can hold one another up as we pass through the waters.

And we can remind each other: God is with us all the way.

God loves us.

Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/baptismofchristc>

<sup>ii</sup> Quote from Pulpit Fiction podcast 466: Baptism of Christ Year C,  
<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/baptismofchristc>