

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Deep Water and Deeper Love
Isaiah 43
January 9, 2022

A new beginning to a new year can give opportunity to renew our optimism about the year to come. Some years, admittedly, are harder than others to do that, but that's what optimism is for—it's for saying: things are going to get better. I'm going to get better. That's what resolutions serve: here are some ways I'm going to get better this year.

Of course, now, by January 9th, some of those resolutions may already be teetering on the edge. I think it's pretty widely understood that gyms are full for January, but by March are pretty much back to normal. That's just the way it goes. But I'm gonna get better this year. Things are gonna be better.

But what if they aren't? Or what if you have no ability to see how or when or whether things will get better? That's called despair, I think. Or at least hopelessness.

It's goes by a lot of words—despair, hopelessness. The Bible word is *exile*. Or at least the Bible story of despair and hopelessness is the story of exile, and it's the background to the remarkable passage we just heard this morning from Isaiah 43, which I think it has become one of my new favorite passages in all the Bible. It's written to people in exile. Historically, that meant Jews who had been forcibly removed from their homes and homeland around 580 BC and taken east to Babylon. Exile means losing your home, your homeland, your fields, your neighbors. It's losing everything you've worked for and everything that's been part of your life. And now told by your captors: play us a song. Psalm 137 comes from experience: *How can we play a song of Zion in a foreign land? There we hung our harps on the trees and wept.*

Have you ever felt anything like that?

Uprooted, disconnected, disoriented, isolated. Exile means starting over in a place you don't want to start over in and can find no real reason you can find to start over. More of the Old Testament than you probably realize was written to a people who were facing the prospect of exile, or enduring exile, or making sense of life when they'd returned from exile.

Israel was a people whose identity was defined by relationship with God who made them a people, relationship with one another in their shared orientation to the God who made them a people, and relationship with the land, the Promised Land, the sacred places that made the geography of their relationship with one another and God. The city Jerusalem and the temple there were emblematic of their rootedness in their place as a people with God.

What do you do? How do you feel when it's all gone? I don't want to use the temple as a metaphor for our lives, but doing something like that is one way to connect here. Imagine the

thing in your life most precious to you and immovable—the thing that stands for your identity, and now watch it turned to rubble. Ah yes, now we're getting closer. Because I know some of you know the sufferings characteristic of exile.

For Israel, being in exile was grief for sure at what was lost, but there was even something more. It was the existential fear that their sense of identity, the glory of being who they were, belonging to a place and God and a history and a future was all just a fantasy. Commentator John Oswalt says about them and about us, “Much can be endured if we have a sense of destiny borne out of a particular identity. Strip that away, and we think going in on life is hardly worth it. (Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah 40-66*, 137)”

What do you do? How do you feel when what makes you who you are as best as you understood it, is stripped away, chipped away, when your world is rocked? Maybe you know.

That's not to say that all disorientation is bad. There's something exciting about moving to a new city, starting a new job, or even just being thrust into an unknown situation with unmet experienced challenges. Something can come alive in us when we are faced with something new and shaken out of our status quo. And we know that all the time, as hard as that is, it may not be the worst thing for us.

On Christmas Eve this year, the congregation of a church in Mayfield, Kentucky met on folding chairs in their church parking lot because the century old sanctuary had been turned to rubble by a tornado. They grieved this, but they said: “We had a service of closure. After the communion, we thanked God for the memory of every pastor, every deacon and elder that had served. For every Sunday school teacher, every nursery worker... We gave thanks to them, with a promise that we will go forward and continue to serve.”¹ That's how you do disorientation, when you can. If you have the right attitude about it, you can see new challenges as opportunities to grow. Disorientation can be a gift that stretches and challenges us as part of our destiny borne out of our core identity.

But Isaiah 43 is to a people who have lost all of that. I've tried to paint the picture of their despair to give us some historical knowledge but even more an emotional connection. Somewhere in each of our lives or in the life of someone we love, life comes to this cliff edge. Maybe it's because I saw *Dear Evan Hansen* again this week (and am still emotionally reeled by it,) that I'm thinking so much of that image from that story, of a person lying broken on the ground, and the worst part is that they're lying broken on the ground, alone.

I've tried to bring us to this point of connection so we can hear the force of this passage even in its first two words: *But now*. *But now* is a turning point word. *But now*, something's gonna change. *But now*, there's something to say. God says it. “*But now*,” says the Lord, who created you, who formed you, “do not fear. I have called you by name. You are mine.”

¹ (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/christmas-congregants-tornado-ravaged-kentucky-say-goodbye-churches-vo-rcna9956>).

To a people who have fallen and are lying broken on unstable ground that is not their own, a word comes: You've been found. I know your name. In Scripture, to call someone's name is to express an intimate relationship with them. These people, known at this moment as slaves, as foreigners, as these poor, hopeless, helpless exiles, God knows your name. You are not just one of a faceless forgotten misery or annoyance, you are created, you are formed by me. You are Israel, and you still are. These are creation words: *I made you, I know you, I'm here.*

And the passage goes on:

I will be here no matter what you face.
When you go through the waters, I will be with you.
When you pass through raging rivers, they will not overwhelm you.
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned
The flame will not consume you.

Water, river, raging fire, small flame. You will face suffering. When, not if. The Gospel of God is not the superficial promise that all of life is going to be smoothed out. It's the promise of presence. In whatever you face, I am there with you in it. I am your Redeemer, your Savior, your God.

We're not so far away from Christmas now that we can't recall the great Advent prayer of desire for just this. It's not so long ago that we sang *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. Emmanuel, God-with-us, and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lowly exile here, until the son of God appears. In the ancient hymn, Exile is not just a historical episode, but a state of existence until God comes, and God comes. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel. Our Advent prayer at the heart of our longing for God is for God to come. Our Advent prayer is for God to come and be here with us in this. Jesus is our Emmanuel, God's incarnate and everlasting answer to our heart's cry. I am with you, no matter what.

I wonder if this isn't why Jesus was so insistent on being baptized by John. That story has never made a lot of sense to a lot of people—Why would Jesus be baptized? It's never made a lot of sense except that maybe he was just showing us what we should do and so he does it first. But look at that story again through this passage.

Water, for Israel, was rarely a friend. These were not water-loving people. "God, if you're going to deliver us from Egypt and we need to cross the Red Sea, you better part the waters so we can walk across on dry ground. That's what kind of people this was. Water was a force of danger, destruction, and death for Israel. They believed that all the land in the world, as solid as it may seem, was all resting on deep waters of chaos and death. Only God's Spirit, hovering over the waters at Creation can bring peace and order to it, but without God those deep waters are still there always threatening, always lapping, always lurking. You don't have to think of dread and fear as water to always or even sometimes feel like the ground under your feet may not hold you up. But to a people for whom water represents the kind of existential threat that they felt, here comes Jesus and says to John, "Lower me in the water."

For those who have eyes to see, he is lowered not just in the Jordan River, but into all the deep water of the earth, into the deep, into the depths of death and despair, into hell. John lowers Jesus deep, deep, deep--as deep as the Jordan, as deep as grief and despair and sin. Jesus goes down, down past Jonah in his crazy fish, down deep to the places we don't talk about, down there, where there is no light at all. Down there . . . are you down there? God, are you down there? Down there—even down there is Emmanuel, God with us even there. Light in the deep darkness.

Sophie Scholl, a university student in Germany in the 1940s, groped for Christ's light in the deep darkness that she experienced of Nazi Germany. She wrote as one who had been plunged to the basement of the earth,

If I can't write anything else just now, it's only because there's a terrible absurdity about a drowning man who, instead of calling for help, launches into a scientific, philosophical, or theological dissertation while the sinister tentacles of the creatures on the seabed are encircling his arms and legs, and the waves are breaking over him. It's only because I'm filled with fear, that and nothing else, and feel an undivided yearning for him who can relieve me of it.

I'm still so remote from God that I don't even sense his presence when I pray. Sometimes when I utter God's name, in fact, I feel like sinking into a void. It isn't a frightening or dizzy-making sensation, it's nothing at all – and that's far more terrible. But prayer is the only remedy for that, and however many little devils scurry around inside me, I shall cling to the rope God has thrown me in Jesus Christ, even if my numb hands can no longer feel it.

In the waters, through the river, in the fire, I am with you. I am there, and he rises bringing us with him. This is the message of hope and love of the Gospel. How deep the waters, how deeper the Father's love for us.

And it is love, intimate love. The rest of Isaiah's passage is a lover's sonnet. I would love you to the ends and back. I would give the whole world for you. I would give everything I've ever made for you. You are precious to me. You are honored. I love you.

I confess that I only recently learned that, as far as I can tell, this is the only time in all of Scripture that God says I love you. God's love is manifested in many ways, but this is the only time God says it like this: I love you. My people scattered, north, south, east, west, I love you, and I'm knitting you back together. My sons and my daughters, from the ends of the earth, everyone called by my name.

I formed you.

I made you.

I love you.

I don't know why God doesn't say it more often. God says a lot through the prophets, evangelists, and apostles. Maybe those 3 words are hard to say? I and love and you. Maybe God would rather show it than say it. Or maybe God gives us what we need when we need it.

The people God said it to were not those who had done anything to earn God's love--whatever that means, but those who were in desperate need of hearing and maybe even were beyond that point. People who had desperate need of being assured that their lives had meaning and a future and a hope. They got so much more; not just assurance in their past identity in a covenant of law and duty, but now something new—Love.

But, in a way, God didn't say I love you just once. God's word, I love you, is renewed every time this scripture passage is read, every time we hear it again on some cold, winter morning when you feel like all is lost, but you open your Bible to Isaiah 43. This word is here waiting for you: I love you.

This word is here waiting for you:

I would do anything for you.

I would give the whole world for you.

I am with you no matter what you're going through.

I love you.

Amen.