

Isaiah 43:1-7 Pastor Bill Uetricht 1/10/10 Baptism of our Lord

My wife will tell you that I have a preoccupation with words. I note them. I love using them. That's probably a good thing since much of my work involves the use of words. In light of this preoccupation, it is probably isn't surprising that two little words from today's first reading from Isaiah kept coming back to me this past week as I was thinking about this sermon. The words are the first two words of the text: **but now**.

The word "but" suggests that something new is about ready to be described. "But" has this way of contrasting things. "I used to live in Cincinnati, but now I live in Muskegon." The word "now" suggests that attention is being made to a present reality. "Yesterday I gorged myself on sugar-laced candies, but now (today) I am eating only Brussels sprouts and spinach."

For our text to begin with "but now" something different must have occurred previously. And sure enough, in Isaiah's telling of the story, it did. Just before the beginning of our text from Isaiah we are told of Israel's miserable situation. Listen to Isaiah: "This is a people robbed and plundered; all of them are trapped in holes and hidden in prisons. They have become a prey with no one to rescue [them], a spoil with no one to say, 'Restore.'" Isaiah is describing what has happened to the people of God as the result of the Babylonian invasion of their land.

The prophet goes on to reflect on why things are so bad. He says, "Who gave up Jacob [Israel] to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers? Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned." Isaiah interprets the situation of the Babylonian invasion and eventually the experience

of exile for many of the people of God as a matter of God giving up Israel. **But now!** But now, something new is occurring.

It strikes me that this “but now” comes not because Israel drags itself on its knees, groveling before God, repenting of how awful they have been. There’s no talk of repentance. There is just talk of the “but now.” It’s as if God has just had enough of the old reality, and he is ready to do something radically new. It isn’t really all about Israel. It is all about God, about the surprising arrival of grace. But now!

But now what? “But now, thus says the Lord, the one who created you by the way, the one who formed you into a people: Do not fear, for I have *redeemed* you.” I remember when I was a kid you could *redeem* S and H green stamps. You got these little stamps when you bought food at the grocery or when you purchased gas. And you could take them to a center where you could get stuff. You gave them the stamps, and they gave you the stuff. Biblically, the idea of redemption is somewhat similar. The word came from the reality of buying someone out of debt or slavery. A person because he or she owed money to another would become a slave. A person would remain a slave until they were able to redeem themselves or someone else would redeem them, bought them out of slavery. Isaiah says that God bought his people out of slavery, a reference to the freedom that they experienced when they were liberated from the Egyptians.

In the new situation that Israel is in (the devastation caused by the Babylonians) he is reminding the people of how he saved them in the past. He set them free. He had a special relationship with them—so special that he called them by name, said that they were his. So now, as they are about to head back home from exile in Babylon, as they will pass through new waters, he will be with them. He will do like

he did in the past. As they go through new rivers, those rivers will not overwhelm them. As they will walk through new fires, they will not be burned. They are so important to him that he is willing to give up the rich nations—Egypt, Ethiopia, Yemen—so that he can have them. They are precious in his sight. He loves them.

The old thing is so yesterday. The new thing is to be their focus now. He's bringing them home. "I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; I will say to the north, 'Give them up,' and to the south, 'Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth.'" It is as if God is saying, "And now for something completely different," as the Monty Python movies used to say. God is up to something new. The old is past and gone. *But now!* But now something new! New freedom! New life!

You know, in many ways, the Bible is a huge "but now" story. Cain kills Abel. *But now*, God puts a mark on Cain to keep him safe. The peoples of the world try to make a name for themselves, so they build a big tower in the sky. Their languages are confused by God, so they can't complete the project. They then are scattered all over the world into private little corners of darkness, *but now* God gives to the world one people who will be a light to the rest of those corners. The people of Israel find themselves enslaved by evil taskmasters in Egypt, *but now* God leads them to freedom. These freed slaves end up in the wilderness, longing for the good old days of slavery in Egypt. They miss the food and drink of Egypt, *but now* God gives them manna in the wilderness, water in the desert, and finally a land to call their own. Oh, they didn't take care of that land. They mistreated it. They neglected the poor and vulnerable among them. They cheated the people in the

courts. *But now*, God sent to them prophets, signs of a love that would not let them go. And then there were new invaders—Babylonians. They were mean. They were ugly. They sent Israel’s brightest and best into exile. *But now!* But now God is bringing them home.

The “but now” story doesn’t end with the Old Testament, however. It continues in the New Testament. Mary is young. She is a virgin. *But now*, God visits her, and she becomes pregnant with Jesus, the Son of God. A young man demands his share of the property before the death of his father. He runs off, spends a lot of it extravagantly. A famine hits the land where he is now living. He has to eat with the unclean pigs in order to survive, so he decides to head back home. Before he can grovel in the presence of his father, the father comes running to greet him and then throws a party for him. *But now!* The one who told that story was beginning to ruffle some feathers as he was talking about God’s ways, as he was proclaiming forgiveness, as he was paying attention to the vulnerable and the left out. The leaders—political and religious—put this one to death. They hung him on a cross, a cruel instrument of Roman torture. That should take care of him. *But now* God raised from the dead.

Today we celebrate the baptism of our Lord, the one whom God eventually raised. Luke makes little ado about the actual baptism. He doesn’t tell us who did it, or where it happened. We are simply told that just like everybody else who was going out to be baptized by John Jesus was baptized. It’s like he was one of the crowd. He prayed as he was being baptized, and the Spirit came upon him in bodily form like a dove. A voice spoke from heaven and said, “But now, this one who is one of the gang, one just like you, one who is a good practicing Jew—this one I call ‘my Son,’ the loved one. With him I am well pleased.”

Now I realize that this story is primarily about Jesus' baptism. But it seems to me that it can inform how we view our own baptisms. To be baptized is to be given the Spirit of God, God's very energy. To be baptized is to be named child of God, the loved one. To be baptized is to hear the command not to fear because we are called by name, precious in God's sight, loved by God. To be baptized is to journey with one who journeys with us when the rivers become deep and the flames appear to be all consuming.

It seems to me that our baptisms represent for us the way we experience the "but now" story personally. I have really blown it. My life has been turned in on myself. I have neglected my family. *But now*, I am baptized. My parents were no good to me. They abused me. They were alcoholic. The past ruined me. *But now*, I am baptized. Life was cruel to me. My body is wired for addiction. And what's more, the losses I have known are immense. Life without a parent or a child is so difficult. I don't feel I can go on. *But now*, I am baptized. I am the divorced, feeling angry, but also responsible. Life is tough when you have to manage it by yourself. *But now*, I am baptized. I am losing my independence. I can't do what I used to do. I think I might have to go into a nursing home. What am I worth anyway? *But now*, I am baptized.

But now, in the midst of all of the challenges, in the midst of all of the changes, in the midst of all of my brokenness, in the midst of life's craziness, I hear, "Thus says the Lord, the one who created me, the one who formed me: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight, honored, and I love you.'"

**But now!** How sweet are those words!

