



ZUMBRO

LUTHERAN CHURCH

You Are Not Forgotten
Pastor Vern Christopherson

June 6, 2021

Isaiah 43: 1-7 NSRV

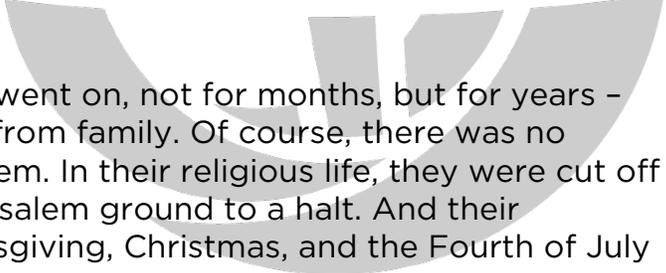
¹But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. ⁵Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; ⁶I 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 — ⁷everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Our pandemic has dragged on for a long time. We've spent countless hours alone. So, how have you been filling up your time? Zoom meetings? Phone calls? TV? Stuff on the Internet? Maybe you've found time for some more positive pursuits: Walking? Letter writing? Books? Prayer?

There's a word that's been used to describe our current situation. Maybe you've heard it. It's called *languishing*. It's not burnout. It's not depression. It's not hopelessness. It's more a feeling of being joyless and aimless: *languishing*.

Some refer to languishing as the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between depression and flourishing. You're not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to focus, and can make a person feel alone far too much of the time.

Does any of this sound familiar? It may or not be what you've been experiencing, but you probably know someone who has. Languishing might have been what the people of Israel were experiencing when they were in exile in Babylon. The backstory of the exile is complicated, but it goes something like this: In the early 6th century B.C. the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land of Israel. There was widespread destruction. Specifically, in 587 B.C. the Babylonian armies marched on Jerusalem. The city was sacked. The magnificent temple was destroyed. And a good many people were either captured or killed. On top of that, prominent citizens were forced to leave their homes, or what was left of them behind, and were paraded into exile in Babylon.



This was their experience of languishing, only it went on, not for months, but for years - close to 50 years. People were often separated from family. Of course, there was no FaceTime, cell phones, or internet to connect them. In their religious life, they were cut off from the temple. The annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem ground to a halt. And their sacrifices were stopped. It was not unlike Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the Fourth of July all coming to an end at once.

Depending on which prophet was doing the preaching, there was a sinking feeling that they had brought this on themselves - with their greed, pride, and neglect of God. They couldn't help but wonder: was God punishing them for their sins and mistakes? Was God angry at them?

As time wore on, they were tempted to believe that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than the God of Israel. The name for their God was Yahweh, which we translate as "Lord." But now Babylon was in power. They had won the war. Maybe Yahweh wasn't as strong as they thought. Or worse, maybe Yahweh had all but forgotten them.

Our scripture reading for today comes out of the exile. The children of Israel were stuck. They were languishing. The loneliness, the powerlessness, and the sense of isolation dragged on and on and on. They wanted to go back to the way things were. They so wanted things to be normal again.

Then one day, along comes a new voice, a prophet in the line of Isaiah of old. He starts out with words of tenderness: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term. That her penalty is paid. That she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

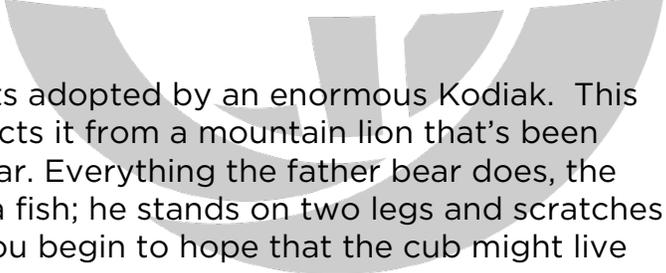
Our reading for today follows up on this comforting theme, but takes it a step further. It's intended for people at the end of their rope, who can barely believe that Yahweh still cares about them. It's meant to reawaken their faith, and reassure them that God has not forgotten them.

Listen to the words again: "Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

These are strong words. Powerful words. But here's the deal, I wonder if Israel could believe them? They'd been languishing for too long. They'd been feeling alone and forgotten. They had to be wondering: Does Yahweh even care?

In 1989 a movie came out called *The Bear*. Perhaps you saw it. It's the saga of a tiny bear cub whose mother is killed in a rockslide. The cub survives, but the viewer knows that his long-term chances of survival are slim.





Then the unexpected happens. The little cub gets adopted by an enormous Kodiak. This giant is always watching over the cub. He protects it from a mountain lion that's been stalking him. He teaches the cub how to be a bear. Everything the father bear does, the cub imitates: he wades into a stream and stabs a fish; he stands on two legs and scratches his back against a tree. As the movie goes on, you begin to hope that the cub might live after all.

But one day these two get separated. The little bear can't see his father anywhere. The mountain lion has never forgotten the cub. He finally sees an opportunity. He comes silently, swiftly, face-to-face with the cub. He is about to spring. The little bear does what he'd seen his father do. He rears up on his hind legs, lifts his paws, and tries to growl fiercely. But the best he can manage is a frightened little squeak. The mountain lion is not convinced. Both the cub and his attacker know he's about to die.

The camera focuses on the mountain lion, whose face suddenly registers a look of fear. He stops snarling, turns, and slinks away. The camera returns to the cub. He is as surprised as anyone watching. Could his squeaky little growl have worked so well? Then the camera pans back, and we see what we did not see before. We see what the little bear cannot. Behind the little bear is the great Kodiak, standing on his hind legs, his massive body poised to save his son with a single swipe. Big paws! Fierce growl!

Just then we know: the little bear had nothing to worry about. The cub couldn't see him or hear him, but the father was there all the time. The father could be trusted, even when he seemed to be absent, even when the cub felt forgotten.

We know this story, don't we? There are plenty of times in the Bible when the children of Israel had to learn to trust the Lord God. They could stand up to Pharaoh in Egypt. They could march around Jericho and watch the walls come tumbling down. They could take on the Goliaths of this world. They could turn away from the shimmering gods of Babylon and once again believe that Yahweh had not forgotten them. Truly, they were safely in God's care.

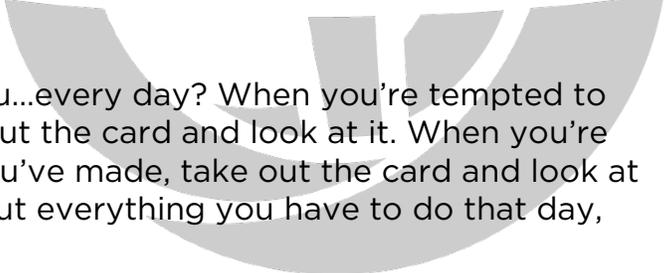
The prophet in the line of Isaiah puts it something like this: "You are the beloved of God. You believe in a great big God! Even if you can't always see or hear this God, he is always with you. He never takes his eye off of you."

And next comes the centerpiece of God's word to the exiles, some of the most beautiful words in all of scripture: "For I am the Lord your God, the holy One of Israel, your Savior....Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Friends, could you use a God like that in your life? I'm thinking you can. Why not write down these words on a card and carry them with you: "For you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Indeed, you are the beloved of God. You may have gone through a period of languishing, and you may have often felt alone, but you were not alone. You were not forgotten.





What if you carried these words around with you...every day? When you're tempted to languish because the pandemic drags on, take out the card and look at it. When you're tempted to despair because of some mistake you've made, take out the card and look at it. When you wake up early and are anxious about everything you have to do that day, take out the card and look at it.

Never doubt it: the God who loves you is greater than you can imagine. You may not be able to see or hear this God, but God is with you. God is watching. God has not forgotten you. And why? *Because - as God says to each one of us - you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Amen.*

