Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Last week we celebrated Epiphany, the Incarnation of God into the human baby, Jesus. This week Mary's baby has grown up and is baptized. A number of weeks ago as I began working with these Texts, I welcomed the gracious and spacious words from Isaiah. I basked in God's Words, "You are precious in My sight, and glorified, and I love you." These words are repeated, echoed in Jesus' baptism when heaven opens and we hear God's Voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased." God's Words are infinitely tender, loving, affirming. I want to bask in their light and beauty all day long, all lifelong. I want to just sit and enjoy their glow, their warmth.

In Isaiah, God's expression of love for us follows impossible and comforting promises: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...they will not wash you away; when you walk through fire you will not be burned." These are precious promises that we want to hold onto. Until. Until we find ourselves passing through waters and being overwhelmed, being swept away by them. Until we find ourselves in fire getting burned. Until the earth quakes and tens of thousands of God's beloved children are broken and die. What do these promises mean in the face of such unspeakable pain and brokenness as is being experienced in Haiti? And by those who have loved ones there? What does it mean to be precious and glorified when we find ourselves in crisis, in turmoil, in complete darkness? What does it mean to be God's beloved daughter, God's beloved son when the waters of injustice and poverty overwhelm us? And the fires of violence and war burn us?

These are big questions and I'll let you know right up front that I don't have *the* answer. This is a good time to say, I don't know. Confessing that *I don't know* is a recognition that God is moving and being present in the world, even though, and in ways that we do not and cannot see or hear or comprehend. We are, afterall, the created—we are not the Creator.

But, just because we don't know the answers to the big questions doesn't mean we don't know anything. Our inability to understand or explain isn't a failure or flaw, not of us or of the Living God. It is, instead, a limitation of our humanity. The limits of our humanity do *not* diminish God or God's Love, God's promises, or God's Presence in the world.

Let's turn to the Isaiah passage for today. Chapter 43 opens which we've heard in two translations begins, "So now, here is what YHWH says. YHWH, the Eternal One who created you, the Holy One who formed you." The *you* that Isaiah is addressing is a plural you, the community of God's people. It is surely true that God created and formed the *individuals* who made up that community, but it is first of all the *community* of people who are hearing these words. Now, as we hear these opening words in English, we're likely to hear "the One who created you" as synonymous to "the One who formed you." But in Hebrew these words are not synonyms. The Hebrew verb for *create* is *bara*. If you learn only one Hebrew word, this is one to put at the top of your list! *B-a-r-a*. In the Bible, God is the only One who *bara*-s. Humans do not *bara*. In the first creation story, God is *bara*-ing. The word shows up most often in Isaiah, either as a *creating* verb or naming the *Creator*. So in this first verse Isaiah is confessing, acknowledging that they, as a people, have been created by God, given life and being by Creator God.

And, Isaiah says, God *formed* you. You as in God's people. This Hebrew verb means to shape, as in shaping and molding; the person who shapes is called a potter. The Eternal One is not only Creator of the universe and of all creation, but the Holy One of Israel is also the One who holds the universe and creation and creatures, shaping, caring, forming. God is the Potter, holding the past, present, and future. There is *nothing* untouched by God's hands, *nothing* beyond God's hands. We, all of us, are eternally being held in God's hands.

Then God speaks and we're reminded of God's pervasive and persistent presence. God begins to tell this community of people their story, beginning of course with the familiar, "Do not fear." "Don't be afraid, for I have paid your ransom, I have bought you back. I have *called you out* by name, you are Mine." They are God's chosen. Their liberation from slavery in Egypt belongs to God; God bought their freedom. This naming, proclaiming by name is God claiming sovereignty, God loves them. God cares for them. God is eternally present, caring, seeing, holding.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." In the life and history of God's people, passing through the Red Sea and the River Jordan are two significant events, events that save and unburden and heal. Events that fulfill promises after years and lifetimes of waiting, of being emptied and being filled. Events that create and shape God's people. The crossing of the Red Sea marked their liberation, their salvation from bondage. The crossing of the Jordan River marked the end of their wilderness journeying and the beginning of settling in the Promised Land. Each of these passings-through was a mixture of celebration—the end of slavery, the end of wilderness. And terror—in one instance it's Pharaoh's army behind them that terrifies and in the other it's the unknown, the unexpected, the unforeseen that terrifies. These crossings are difficult, hard places and journeys

God ends this mixture of history and promise, "When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you." The first "burn" refers to the kind of burning that brands a person or animal. No matter what happens, God says, you will always be Mine. No one else can place their brand, their claim on you. God's people will always be God's chosen. And the second burn, the flame that consumes refers to strong emotions, as in burning anger, as in Pharaoh's burning anger. The wrath of Pharaoh couldn't

and will never consume you, God's beloved people, "for I am the Eternal your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

"You are precious in my sight, and glorified, and I love you." What does it mean to be God's beloved? There may not be definitive answers, but Luke turns our eyes, gives us a direction to look and follow.

Chapter 3 v 15 begins, "And the people were waiting, and all wondered in their hearts about John, whether he might be the Messiah." It may be helpful to note that in that time lots of people, well, lots of men(!) were making messiah claims. It was a time of waiting for a messiah, a time of expectation, a time of questioning and debating and arguing about who was and who wasn't the messiah. And John answers them, "I am baptizing you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." John is *not* the messiah.

These images of water and fire, these images of immersion into water and fire, remind us of the Isaiah passage. John knows his Scripture and he is surely using the stories and images of his people, and building on them. If in our time we think of baptism first of all as we've seen or experienced it, as a cleansing sacrament, and for some of us cleansing by sprinkling or pouring of water, we may miss the relationship between baptism and entering *into* the waters of the Red Sea and Jordan River. Those of us who've experienced baptism by immersion may have more of a sense of passing through the waters, of being sacramental-ly cleansed. So John is telling all the people that he can baptize with water. He can offer ritual cleansing. John can take them through the waters of the Red Sea, through the Jordan. But someone else, someone more powerful, someone mightier, stronger will baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John goes on, saying, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Now, if you're like me, you want to ignore this sentence. Just pretend it isn't there. It's one of these sentences that have been used for judgment and hellfire sermons, sermons I'd just as soon forget. But maybe John is saying or pointing to something else, particularly if we see and hear this Text in light of Hebrew Scripture, in light of the Isaiah passage. And what does it have to do with being God's beloved daughters and sons?

Clearly John, and the Gospel writer, Luke, are referring to and directing our gaze to Jesus. Jesus is the one who is coming. Our eyes are turned to look at him. The winnowing fork is in Jesus' hands. A winnowing fork, or shovel, as you may already know, is a threshing tool. The process of threshing at that time began by beating the grain that was scattered on the threshing floor, beating it to separate the wheat berry from the husk. With the winnowing shovel, the wheat is tossed into the air for the wind to carry away the chaff. The blowing wind lifts the chaff, blows that which has been beaten and separated and which is no longer usable, carrying it away, leaving the berry of the wheat ready for use. And when the wheat is gathered off the threshing floor, the chaff that remains is burned.

Wind and fire get rid of the chaff. In the ancient languages, as you likely know, the word for wind also means spirit and breath and blowing. So John's words could, as well, read, "But one who is more powerful that I will baptize you with Holy Wind and fire." There is a relationship, there is something in common between threshing and baptism. In water baptism we step into and move through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan. John is suggesting that in the baptism of Holy Wind and fire, we end up on the threshing floor and in the winnowing shovel.

Jesus is the one who baptizes with Holy Wind and fire. But first, Jesus will be baptized with water. And when he receives his water baptism, when he ritually passes through the waters, we hear a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus, God's beloved, has been baptized with water and is now ready for the baptism of Holy Wind and fire, a baptism that begins on the threshing floor of the wilderness temptations.

Jesus shows us what it means, what it looks like to be God's beloved. The life of Jesus shows us what being chosen by God looks like. It looks like being born in a stable. It looks like being at the bottom of the social ladder and being a social, religious, and political outcast. Jesus, God's beloved, gave himself—his life, his ministry—to the threshing floor. He was beaten—repeatedly. Yet he kept giving himself. He gave himself fully, even when he knew and experienced the ceaseless baptism of fire and Holy Wind. Throughout his ministry, the chaff was being blown away, burned, but Jesus was not consumed. Jesus understood that being God's beloved, being chosen by God meant that ultimately and eternally the Living God creates and holds life. Jesus lived, knowing that whatever happened, he was still, and always, alive, the beloved of God. He continued to give himself, knowing that life happens on the threshing floor every bit as much as life happens at the dining table. There is no bread if there isn't a threshing floor. There is no Bread of Life if there is no baptism of fire and Holy Wind.

We didn't walk with Jesus and sometimes his life seems like an impossible example. But people like Martin Luther King, Jr. did walk among us and we or people we know did walk with him. Keeping his eyes on Jesus, King gave himself to the threshing floor, gave himself to the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire, knowing that the wheat berry would not be destroyed, that to be used, the wheat must be broken. King, like Jesus, gave himself to

being broken. Gave himself to his people, to God's people, to the world. And King's vision continues to live as liberating, saving, healing Good News.

Holy Wind continues to blow Good News. Holy Spirit continues to move and stir among us. The breath of the Living God continues to breathe into us, into all the world, into all of creation. All of our journeyings will always take us through times of bondage, freedom, wilderness, promise. Through water and fire. Through baptism. We, as a community of God's beloved, God's beloved creation and creatures, will know and experience pain and brokenness. And we will know joy and healing. We will know utter emptiness. And we will experience abundant fullness. For we are, eternally, being created and formed by the Living God, within the community of God's beloved. In the places and spaces of fullness, we bask in our beloved-ness, soaking in light and nourishment and beauty for those times when we find ourselves on the threshing floor.

"You are precious in My sight, and glorified, and I love you."

"You are my daughter, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased."

"You are my son, the Beloved; with You I am well pleased."