

THE HEART OF THE MATTER A SERMON ON ISAIAH 43:1-17

by Rev. Russell B. Smith

Once upon a time there was a pastor who wanted a break from preaching every Sunday. He told everyone in his church that he was going to a seminary, and he arranged for his associate pastor to preach for him. Then, that Sunday, he drove out to a golf course far away from his church, where he would be sure that he wouldn't encounter any of his parishioners. He teed up on the first hole. A pretty little par three hole with a water hazard off to the right. Whack. It was a beautiful shot, the ball arcing high and landing with little effort on the edge of the green, where it rolled straight into the cup. Plop. Hole in one. The second hole was a longer par four with a dogleg to the left. Whack. The ball soared over the trees — hit the green, and straight into the cup. The preacher couldn't believe he'd hit two hole in ones. The third hole — hole in one. The fourth — hole in one. The fifth — hole in one.

Now while all this is going on, up in heaven, one of the angels approaches God and says "Why are you doing that— he's a pastor who is skipping church and lied about it — why are you blessing him like that?" God looked back with a twinkle in his eye "What blessing? I'm giving him a perfect game of golf and he can't tell a soul."

I don't care what anyone says, that was the best game of my life.

One of my mentors, John Tolson, the head of a national men's ministry, the *Gathering of Men*, used to tell each Christian to skip worship once or twice a year, just so it doesn't become a legalistic routine. I can see the twinkle in your eyes — let me repeat — once or twice a *year*, not a month.

In reality, corporate worship should be one of the most anticipated hours each week. When we gather here for worship, something exciting happens that gives us the power and impetus to make it through the week as a whole. That's why we're going to take a few weeks to focus on worship. This week we'll focus on who worship is for and how we respond. Over the following four weeks, we'll talk about:

- Scripture — why the word of God is so important in worship

- Communion — why do we do this thing with bread and juice once a month
- Baptism — what is the big deal with babies and water
- Personal Worship — how do we sustain the momentum throughout the week

Now, looking back to our text, the most important principle of worship is articulated in verses 5-7. The point here is that worship isn't for us: it's for God. The point of worship isn't to entertain or satisfy us — worship isn't so much about what pleases us as it is about what pleases God. The point of worship is to bring praise to our Maker. Everything we do in worship brings him that praise — as we tell the stories of the great things he has done, as we pray for his continued involvement in our world, as we sing about his wonderful deeds and acts, and as we receive the grace that he extends toward us. Notice that this passage makes it clear that God calls us together to worship, and that we were specifically made for that purpose.

However, even though worship is all about God, it elicits within us a response. This makes perfect sense — when we are doing what we were created to do, it resonates deeply within us. We respond with our whole being — our minds, our actions, and our emotions. Most of us understand pretty well how we respond with our minds, digesting and analyzing the information presented in worship. Most of us get the idea that we should be applying the principles taught in worship to our daily lives. However what brings passion and energy to our worship is the emotional component. There are certain emotional responses that Scripture teaches we can expect when we come to worship. If we had a whole weekend seminar, we could explore the richness and diversity of emotion as it is presented in the scripture. A whole array of emotion from conviction of sin, joy in the presence of the Lord, excitement about the great things done for us, anguish over our sin, bitter lament — all facets of our emotional life should come to play in our worship. The catalog of appropriate scriptural responses is endless. Our look at today's passage is just a sampling so that we can better open our eyes to see how our heart should be affected by worship.

ISA 43:1 But now, this is what the LORD says —
 he who created you, O Jacob,
 he who formed you, O Israel:
 "Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
 I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

ISA 43:2 When you pass through the waters,
 I will be with you;
 and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.

ISA 43:3 For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.

ISA 43:4 Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give men in exchange for you,
and people in exchange for your life.

ISA 43:5 Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.

ISA 43:6 I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth —

ISA 43:7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

ISA 43:8 Lead out those who have eyes but are blind,
who have ears but are deaf.

ISA 43:9 All the nations gather together
and the peoples assemble.
Which of them foretold this
and proclaimed to us the former things?
Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,
so that others may hear and say, "It is true."

ISA 43:10 "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.

ISA 43:11 I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no savior.

ISA 43:12 I have revealed and saved and proclaimed —
I, and not some foreign god among you.
You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God.

ISA 43:13 Yes, and from ancient days I am he.
No one can deliver out of my hand.
When I act, who can reverse it?"

ISA 43:14 This is what the LORD says —
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
"For your sake I will send to Babylon
and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,
in the ships in which they took pride.

ISA 43:15 I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel's Creator, your King."

ISA 43:16 This is what the LORD says —
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,

ISA 43:17 who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.

One of the first emotions that grab us from this passage is the feeling of **belonging**. Look at verse 1. "You are mine." You belong to me — I chose you.

It's important to remember that the first part of Isaiah deals with God's judgment on the nations and upon Israel in particular. In chapter 40, however, it turns to talk about Israel's deliverance, but the passage right before our scripture for today goes back to talk about judgment upon Israel. Therefore, the dominant emotion leading up to this passage is one of conviction over wrongdoing. And now, here God says "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

A few weeks ago I was listening to a talk by Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church in Chicago, one of the most exciting churches in the country. He was talking about the family and the importance of expressing love to your children. He said that while his children were growing up, he'd tuck them in every night. He'd go into his daughter's room and say "If you lined up all the

little girls in all the world, I'd choose you." and then to his son's room "If you lined up all the little boys in all the world, I'd choose you." Special selection — isn't that great? It conveys that you're special; you're precious in someone's sight. I've started to say that line to Sarah, because I want her to have a sense that she is special and precious. Beyond that, I want her to know that my love for her is but a pale reflection of the Father's love for her.

One of my best friends and encouragers is Tim Fary, who lives down in Asheville, North Carolina. Last fall I was down in the mouth about something — I don't even remember what it was. I was unloading it onto Tim. A few days later, I received an email from him. This is the how email started "Jesus called my office today, he told me that if I happened to talk to you I needed to relay a message for him." From there, he encouraged me about various things going on in my life, and he ended by saying ... "He also wanted you to know that's he's proud of your development, much like you are of your little daughter Sarah Grace, as a matter of fact, exactly like that." Tim's words immediately hit home — the delight that I take in Sarah is the same delight that the Father takes in me. And now I pass that on to you — it is the same delight that the Father takes in all His children. When you come into the family of God by accepting Jesus Christ as lord and savior, that is the feeling of belonging that comes. "I have summoned you by name. You are mine!"

Worship is all about God. When we come to worship, it inspires within us a sense of belonging. But it should also inspire within us a sense of trust. Not just trust that we belong to the Father, but trust that He will care for us through trying times. Look at verse 2. No matter what the trying instances, God promises to be with his people. In worship, we tell the stories of God's faithfulness and are inspired to remember that he always cares for his people.

Let's be honest with ourselves. These past few months have been difficult for our congregation. Both Michael and Mary Ann have left us. Our regular routines are being disrupted by the work that's going to start in our fellowship hall. The budget is tight right now. I know that some of you are worried. Believe me, I know that whispering that goes on around these and other issues. On top of that, I know that each of us has our own personal difficulties — worries about job security, worries about the future of our children, worries about the care of our parents. The income doesn't seem to cover the expenses, and how are we going to make it to next month. On top of that, I know that there are broader worries — will our city recover from the effects of the riots and the economic boycotts? Will there be another terrorist attack on American soil, and will it be near us? All of these are valid concerns that occupy our imaginations.

But — in worship, we are told the story of God who is much bigger than all that. We are told of God who delivered his people through the Red Sea. We are told of God died and rose again. We are told of God who for four thousand years

has preserved and cared for his beloved children. When we come to worship and when we experience his presence and we're reminded of his mighty work, we feel trust. We're safe within our Father's care. And we know that to be true — hasn't God miraculously preserved this congregation over the last decade? When everybody else told us to close the doors and say goodbye, did God give up on us? This is our time to exercise trust. This trust that is inspired in worship helps us develop the attitude that Paul had in Philippians 3:13-14 "... this one thing I do. Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." This trust enables us to stop languishing in the past or agonizing over the difficulties of the present and fix our eyes on the wonderful future that Christ has for us.

Worship is all about God. When we come to worship, it inspires within us a sense of belonging and a sense of trust. It also inspires a sense of awe. Look at verse 3. The names of God convey his majesty. The name translated with the all capitals LORD is the actual divine name of God. We've talked before about the respect and power that went along with that divine name. We've talked about the scribes who, when they wrote that very divine name, they would break the quill they had been using out of respect. He is the *Holy One of Israel*. Holy means set apart for a special purpose. But when we talk of God's holiness we mean mainly two things — the first is his absolute majesty — he is not a creature. He is not something subject to the dictates of a living being. He is completely above all things and as such He is stunning in majesty. The other part of holiness is that God stands apart from everything that is evil and bad. Every last bit. He cannot stand the slightest evil thought word or deed. Both senses of Holiness are pictured in Isaiah's story of his call to ministry — he tells us about it in Chapter 6:1-7. Do you get a sense of the awe, the sense of fear before something completely other? That's the very feeling that worship inspires within us.

Belonging, Trust, Awe, Conviction, among many others. These reflect that God is both completely beyond us, and yet completely personal. He is both terrible in his splendor and tender in his loving care. These feelings don't arise when we come to worship for our own entertainment. They only arise when we come expecting to encounter the living God. We can't produce these emotions, but we can prepare ourselves to receive whatever God gives us in worship. But how?

- If we lay aside for a time the day-to-day cares of our lives
- If we endeavor for a time to stop the running freight train of our concerns — it'll be there when you're done with worship, don't worry

- If we stop considering worship as an entertainment on par with a nice, well-articulated motivational speech
- If we start realizing that our experience in worship depends much more upon our own attitudes going into worship than it does upon the quality of the speaker or the music
- If we start coming for the express purpose of meeting with our maker, Holy One of Israel
- If, before worship, we cry out in our hearts “Lord, speak to me today — give me your message.”
- If we pray for worship throughout the week

Then God will not only speak to our minds and influence our actions, but he will stir our hearts, and we will never be the same again. Amen.