***I Have Called You By Name***

A Sermon Preached at Lawrence Park Community Church, May 5, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7

Rev. John Suk, PhD

This is a sermon about why theology is important. And I will eventually connect that to today’s baptism of Giorgia. But first, a story.

Thirty years ago, I wrote the book *Dad’s Dying.* It was about a high-school senior whose father suffered from AIDS. As her father faded, this girl spoke with her friends, her teachers, and a Roman Catholic nun about death and comfort.

The book sold well. An Evangelical magazine, *Campus Life*, even excerpted a chapter for one of their issues.

The *Campus Life* article was illustrated with the drawing up here, and on the front of your bulletin covers. The girl in the drawing is the one whose father is dying. She’s surrounded by the fire of the circumstances that she finds herself in—those are the rings around her arms and waist. She’s also nearly, but not quite, submerged by water in the background. Around the edge of the drawing are these words, from today’s scripture reading: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you walk through the fire you will not be burned and the flames will not set you ablaze. You are mine.” In the book, a minister shares these words to comfort the young girl.

I have since used those words, many times, with parishioners. I’d change them up a bit, though, to give them added punch. So, if Sally and Mark visited me, for example, perhaps after the death of a loved one, instead of saying, “Thus says the Lord, he who created you Israel, he who formed you Jacob,” I’d replace the words Israel and Jacob with the names of those visiting me, thus: “Thus says the Lord, he who created you Sally, he who formed you Mark. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called each of you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you . . .; when you walk through fire . . . the flame shall not consume you.”

Along the way, I would point out to Sally and Mark, or whoever, that the promise of this passage is not that sorrows like sea billows won’t threaten us, but that when they do, God said, quote, “I will be with you.” My rewrite of this passage makes it very personal and very encouraging for individual people or couples.

So, with that in mind, I chose this text for this morning’s message. To encourage each of you. But after studying the passage carefully, I have to confess that all my life I’ve repackaged this passage inappropriately. I’ve made it do something it was never intended to do, sort of like a person who uses a few thick books to prop up a couch that is missing a leg.

How so? Well, this passage is actually not addressed to contemporary, individual people like Sally or Mark. It was written to comfort a whole nation, ancient Israel, which at this point in the story is living in exile, far from the promised land. Back home, their temple is just a smoking ruin and Jerusalem’s walls are as messed up as a box of spare Lego bricks. In our text, it this nation that is going to be saved from the fire and flood of exile.

What is more, if you read the preceding chapter, you will realize that our pretty text comes after, in the previous chapter, a scorching denunciation of Israel for her moral failures. In fact, Isaiah declares that Israel deserves to be robbed and plundered, trapped in holes, hidden in prisons, and prey without a hope of rescue. She deserves, the “heat of his anger and the fury of war; it [God] set [Israel] on fire all around, but [Israel] did not understand; it burned him, but [Israel] did not take it to heart.” Very tough stuff.

It’s then, without even a few verses or words of transition, that God—or, Isaiah speaking on behalf of God—changes course, and decides to rescue Israel from the very punishments God—just a sentence before—was pouring down on them. It’s almost like good cop, bad cop treatment for Israel. God talks tough to put the fear of God in the prisoner and then God talks nice to make the prisoner turn—to make Israel repent.

But when I use this passage, I’ve always ignored the bad cop part, just as I’ve always ignored the fact that it was written to Israel, and not whoever was sitting in my office.

Anyway, we Christians do this sort of thing to the Old Testament all the time. Instead of treating the Old Testament as a very difficult but honest account of God’s dealings with a very special people, from the perspective of those people, the Jews, we come along and lift out passages we like, such as “I will be with you,” and declare that such passages must be about us, and not about the Jews at all. It’s as if we Christians want to leave Jews with God’s punishments but rob them of God’s grace and forgiveness.

By so doing, we theologize Jewish people out of their own history, their own story. By taking what we like—the blessings—and leaving the Israelites with the curses, we turn the Jewish people into Old Testament scapegoats and victims. Worse, Christians have used that perspective, that robbery, to justify thousands of years of subsequent persecution and genocide.

This move—reading the Old Testament as if its threatened punishments are for the Jewish people for all time, while the Old Testament’s blessings are all for a “new Israel” made up of Christians—this move is called “replacement theology” or the “two senses of prophecy,” one immediate for Israel, but the promise part for the New Testament church.

And, this move matters. Replacement theology is extremely important because it creates the head space people need if they are looking to justify their racist attitudes towards Jewish people. For example, this past week a young man attacked a synagogue in California, killing a female parishioner who threw herself in front of the rabbi to save his life.

This young man, John Earnest, was inspired, in part, by replacement theology that he learned in an Evangelical church in the Calvinist tradition—much like the church I grew up in. Mind you, Earnest had also adopted some terribly evil and stupid lies of the alt-right racist movement. But he was able to do so because his replacement theology created the room he needed, in his head, to demonize Jewish people. If God abandoned all his promises to Israel on account of their disobedience, and transferred those promises to Christians, then why not continue the punishment of Jews in the age of the church, the New Israel?

So, theology matters. How we read scripture matters. The truth is, replacement theology has been close to the root of thousands of years of persecution.

So, what can we take from passages such as this? Especially on a baptism day? Well, there are mysteries here that I cannot address. I can’t explain, in the time left to me, why judgment and redemption are squeezed so tightly together, sometimes, in the Old Testament, as they are in chapters 42 and 43. I think we should ask rabbis about that. They might know.

And, I can’t explain why the Israelites, when they wrote the Old Testament, so often described a God who was wrathful and angry. Mind you, Paul and Jesus sometimes did the same, especially when they spoke of heaven and hell and judgement, in the New Testament.

But, perhaps most importantly, I can’t easily explain the mystery of human evil and violence that continues to be directed at Jews from age to age the same. Humans seem to have a horrible need to make innocents into scapegoats. So now, we need to face up to our history of racism and own our communal need for forgiveness, the sort of cleansing that the waters of baptism point to.

Baptism. You see, by pouring a bit of water over Giorgia’s forehead, we cleanse ourselves of the pride of believing we Christians are the one and only true people of God. Instead, we commit ourselves to being a people who embrace slave and free, male and female, Jew and Greek—who embrace all, whatever religion, race, or sexual orientation, as our partners and equals, in both trial and triumph. The water of baptism signifies that we choose, not replacement theology, but to be good neighbors to all, just as Jesus taught.

Which means, by baptism, we join Giorgia to a community that—with and alongside our Jewish cousins—has committed itself to be a light, as we are able, to all nations, from Palestine to the First Nations to the United Nations. We join Giorgia to a worldwide community that follows the examples of Moses, and Job and Jesus, all Jews; we join Giorgia to a community that aims to be a Niagara Falls of kindness, a voting bloc for our neighbours’ best interests, a non-profit seeking justice for all; we join Giorgia to a family not separated by different strands of DNA but joined in common humanity.

And, we join Giorgia to a community, today, that tries to do theology like Jesus did his life—that does its theology not to exclude or replace, but to embrace and love.