

“Precious” GPPC 1-10-16  
Acts 8:14-17, Isaiah 43:1-7

“Life is suffering.” This is one of the Buddha’s four noble truths. Life is good, but it’s also frustrating, challenging, and painful. “Life is suffering.” And sometimes we bring suffering upon ourselves.

When I first went away to seminary, back in the Paleolithic era, I would sometimes go to a gym and play basketball with some of the other seminarians. Only the guys played; the women were too smart to get involved. And we played as you might expect future pastors and professors and gentle followers of Jesus to play--very competitively. One afternoon we were in the middle of a game, running hard, crashing into each other, the usual mayhem. A fellow I was guarding took a jump shot and I leapt to try to block it. Unsuccessfully, of course. But the guy had jumped pretty high and he brought his elbow down nice and hard just beneath my left eye. The impact knocked me down. I got right back up, seeing stars, blood dripping down my face. I went to the restroom. Got a wet paper towel. Pressed it against the wound until it stopped bleeding. Then I went out to play some more. A couple of guys said,

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“You ought to go get some stitches.” “Nah,” I said. “Seriously, you should get some stitches.” “Nah.” But everybody gave me some space on the court. So I could actually get a shot off, and that was pretty cool.

Back home my spouse said, “You should get some stitches.” “No, I’ll put some ice on it.”

The next day, of course, my eye was swollen and purple. And after a couple of days, I finally went to the doctor who looked at the wound, laughed, and said, “Yeah. You needed stitches all right—two days ago. Too late now.” So for years I had a scar under my eye, a scar finally devoured by middle-age wrinkles. And my face looked terrible for weeks. A seminary friend was pastorally sympathetic, then he looked at my purple wound, smiled and said, “But it looks macho as hell.”

Sometimes we bring suffering upon ourselves, don’t we? Our own stubbornness and stupidity get us into trouble and leave us wounded and scarred.

An elected official drinks too much at a party, staggers to his car, then starts driving home. Before long blue lights appear in his rearview

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mirror. He's arrested and convicted of DUI. His once-promising career and his life are in chaos.

A student falls behind in her studies at college. Desperate, she decides to cheat on the final exam. But the proctor catches her and she is expelled from school.

With our own foolish and stubborn behavior we sometimes bring suffering upon ourselves, don't we? But other times suffering comes to us capricious as a house cat.

A company downsizes and a young mother with two children loses her job. Unemployment quickly runs out and food stamps are not enough to pay the bills. The house goes into foreclosure. There's a waiting list for the homeless shelter. What is she going to do?

The tornado skips some houses but slams into others turning the building and dreams of a lifetime into kindling.

The pathology report comes back positive. Life is now measured by months, not years.

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Grief over a loved one's death is not miraculously healed by time. But pain is unpredictable and returns again and again on its own schedule.

Sometimes we've done nothing to cause suffering in our lives. It comes as an unwelcome, surprise visitor who will not leave when asked. And whether we've helped to cause our own suffering or not, we may feel confused, alone, and worthless.

At the time when God speaks in Isaiah 43, Israel herself knows those feelings. She has suffered under the Assyrian Empire. Then the Babylonian Empire has come into power, leveling Jerusalem, destroying the Temple there, and exiling many Israelites. It's hard for us to fathom a comparison. But imagine Washington, D.C. demolished, and our central places of worship flattened, and most of the country's leaders murdered or deported.

The chosen people of God, Israel, tries to make sense of what has happened. The people are told by the prophets (as they've been warned for some time) that their suffering is a result of their pride, their unfaithfulness, their unwillingness to care for the needy and weak and to

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live as the people they are meant to be. So disaster has been visited upon Israel. And as the actor Will Smith put it, “You know, somehow, ‘I told you so,’ just doesn’t quite say it.”

But in the 40<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah and in the 43<sup>rd</sup> chapter we read today there is a shift in the message. Instead of condemnation, instead of “I told you so,” instead of “you’re getting what you deserve,” the message is radically different. The memo is certainly delivered to Israel, God’s chosen people. But through our baptism into Christ, we Christians are also God’s chosen people. And because God is no tribal god but the Lord who loves all the world, isn’t this love letter also addressed to all people, not merely Jews and Christians?

God says, “I’m the one who created you, and I’m the one who formed you.” The Hebrew word here for “created” is a word reserved only for the creating that God does. We may mix chemicals together to make a new substance. We might say we create a delicious meal, choreograph a beautiful dance, write an interesting story, but whatever we “create” always comes from some thing or some ability given to us

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before. But God alone *creates* something out of nothing. God says, “I’m the one who created you, and I’m the one who formed you.”

And there’s more. God says, “I’ve called you by name. You’re mine.”

A character in a novel says, “Your problem...is that you still believe you own your life.” (Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, 223.) God says to Israel and God says to us, “I’ve called you by name. You belong to me. Your life belongs to me. I have created you for my glory.”

“And,” says God, “I’m redeeming, freeing you from your slavery.”

Israel is being redeemed, freed from her slavery to the Babylonians. And we, you and I, are redeemed, freed, forgiven of our sins.

But why? Hasn’t Israel gotten herself into trouble? And haven’t we so often gotten ourselves into trouble too? Why does God go to the bother of redeeming us, saving us?

“Because,” says God, “You’re precious to me. You’re honored, and I love you.”

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But why are we precious to God, honored, and loved? Because God *is* love. As an outpouring of love within the very being of God, God created the world and us. And we are precious to God. Each of us is precious. Do you and I know that? Do you and I believe that?

Researcher Brené Brown explored how human beings struggle with shame and self-worth. According to her research, “some people engage the world from a place where, no matter the outcome, success or failure, they still feel worthy of love and belonging. That worthiness is never negotiable. She began to think of these people as ‘wholehearted’ people.” (Johnny Sears, *Weavings*, Nov/Dec 2015/Jan 2016, 11.)

God’s invitation to you and me is to become wholehearted people who know down deep that we are loved by God. Our worthiness is never in doubt, because our worth does not depend upon what we do. It depends upon God’s love and God’s love is unshakeable.

That’s why God keeps telling Israel and us, “Do not fear.” Twice in just seven verses God says, “Do not fear.”

On NPR recently they had a story about a woman. They called her “SM” to protect her privacy. In the early 1990s SM came into a

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neuroscientist's office. She seemed quite normal, friendly, open. And she was normal in almost every respect, except one. She had an extremely rare condition, a condition shared by only about 400 people on the earth. SM was unable to feel fear. Because of a strange calcification in the amygdala portion of her brain, SM was unable to feel fear. Scientists tried sudden loud noises, snakes, horrifying photos, everything they could think of to scare her, but she was simply incapable of feeling fear. (Invisibilia, January 16, 2015)

Imagine living a life without fear.

You know we sometimes live our lives paralyzed by fear, unable to attempt changes that would make life better for others and ourselves. And many of us live lives unnecessarily full of dread, fear that we have committed some unforgivable sin that puts us beyond the mercy of God.

Imagine living life without fear. Imagine being freed to attempt changes in life. Imagine letting go of fear of our sins and truly accepting God's mercy in Jesus Christ. God says, "Do not fear, because I have redeemed you; I've called you by name. You are mine. Do not fear, because I am with you. You are precious, and honored, and I love you."

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Imagine living a life without fear. What contentment might we know?

And what might God do in us?

Preaching Professor Fred Craddock told about going with his wife on vacation in The Great Smoky Mountains many years ago. The couple had stopped at a restaurant not too far from Gatlinburg. And an older gentleman struck conversation with Fred and his wife. The man said, “I grew up in these mountains. My mother was not married, and the whole community knew it. I was what was called an illegitimate child. In those days that was a shame, and I was ashamed...When I went into town... I could see people staring at me, making guesses as to who was my father. At school the children said ugly things to me...

“In my early teens I began to attend a little church back in the mountains called Laurel Springs Christian Church. It had a minister who was both attractive and frightening. He had a chiseled face and a heavy beard and a deep voice. I went to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. However, I was afraid that I was not welcome... So I would go just in time for the sermon, and when it was

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over I would move out because I was afraid that someone would say, 'What's a boy like you doing in a church?'

“One Sunday some people queued up in the aisle before I could get out, and I was stopped. Before I could make my way through the group, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was that minister. I cut my eyes around and caught a glimpse of his beard and his chin, and I knew who it was. I trembled in fear. He turned his face around so he could see mine and seemed to be staring for a little while. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my father was. A moment later he said, 'Well, boy, you're a child of...' and he paused there. And I knew it was coming. I knew I would have my feelings hurt. I knew I would not go back again. He said, 'Boy, you're a child of God. I see a striking resemblance, boy.' Then he swatted me on the bottom and said, 'Now, you go claim your inheritance.' I left the building a different person. In fact, that was really the beginning of my life.”

[Craddock asked]... 'What's your name?'

“He said, 'Ben Hooper.'”

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[And Craddock says] “I recalled, though vaguely, my own father talking when I was just a child about the people of Tennessee had twice elected as governor... Ben Hooper.” (Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. Graves and Ward, 156-157.)

Life is suffering and we come to God with all our scars visible and hidden. We come to God who says, “Do not fear, because I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. And you are precious.” Amen. ©Jeff Paschal