

“Do Not Fear, for I Have Redeemed You”

Dear friends, as we close out this year and step into the unknowns of the next, I want to remind you that we live in a Genesis 3 world.

What happens in Genesis chapter 3? The perfection of God’s creation is shattered by sin. Buying into the devil’s lying temptation, Adam and Eve doubt and distrust the One who had shown them nothing but love and goodness. (The evidence was all around them!) They rebel against Him, and with their disobedience they ultimately reject Him, bringing the corruption of sin and death into their lives and into the world. To say that we live in a Genesis 3 world means that we should expect the consequences God proclaimed for a fallen people in a fallen world: pain, tension, disorder, thorns and thistles of all sorts, and finally death. Is this not what you experienced in 2023? This is what you can expect for 2024.

But that’s not all that it means to live in a Genesis 3 world. Even before He announces the consequences of sin, how does God respond to his fallen creatures? First of all He seeks them out in the nakedness of their fear and guilt. Then He promises One who will come and crush the devil, a Savior for Adam and Eve and all their descendants. He further shows His grace to them in the nakedness of their shame by covering them through the death of another, sacrificing an animal to clothe them. And then for their own good He drives them away from the Tree of Life so that they would not eat of it and live forever in sin’s corruption. To say we live in a Genesis 3 world means that we can count on God and trust His goodness and saving love for us through all the pain, tension, disorder, and thorns and thistles of life, even as we face death. Is this not what you experienced in 2023? This is what you can expect for 2024.

Understanding that we live in a Genesis 3 world is the key to understanding why we face hardships in this fallen world. And remembering that God has kept His promise to a Genesis 3 world is the key to enduring these hardships in humility and hope.

This brings us to today’s sermon text. These are words you want to remember for the great difficulties of life in a Genesis 3 world. This is God speaking. I pray that you take from His words the powerful grace and encouragement He offers you for whatever you may face in the new year. We read from Isaiah 43:1-3.

¹ But now, this is what the LORD says – He who created you, Jacob, He who formed you, Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

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.

³ For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”

In order to see something truly remarkable about this text, we need to first look back into Isaiah Chapter 42. And as we do so, I want to ask you a question: Do you think that by Isaiah’s time humanity

had changed since Genesis 3? No. Isaiah 42 tells us that the people of Judah and Jerusalem showed the same rebellion as Adam and Eve. Like Adam and Eve, God surrounded them with evidence of His love and goodness, but they closed their eyes and ears to so much of it. (Isaiah 42:18-19) God called them blind and deaf, saying, **“You have seen many things, but you pay no attention; your ears are open, but you do not listen.”** (Isaiah 42:20) For a spiritually blind and deaf people, God announced fearful consequences: Israel would be plundered and looted. (Isaiah 42:22-24)

When I asked if you think humanity had changed by Isaiah’s time since Genesis 3, I’m quite sure you all answered, “No.” Why did you so quickly conclude that? Because you know that humanity still hasn’t changed since Genesis 3. And you know that because you know yourself. Like Israel in Isaiah’s time, we are spiritual descendants of Adam and Eve; we’ve bought the same lies, and we’ve shown the same rebellion and disobedience in our lives. As you look back on 2023, do you recall times when you showed yourself to be blind and deaf to God’s goodness and love? I know your answer because it’s the same for me.

All this is why the very first words of our sermon text are remarkable: “But now.” Chapter 42 ends with God’s burning anger and the violence of war, the consequences of Israel’s sin. (Isaiah 42:25) “But now” bursts through all this with an astonishingly new declaration from the LORD, one of grace. It is a declaration of grace for all who would listen then in Isaiah’s time and for all who will listen now. It is for you. Your Maker says to you, **“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”**

First the LORD says, **“Do not fear.”** This is a command from God. You find it dozens of times in the Bible. But God never gives this command without promises and assurances of His goodness and love. Let’s take a closer look at those promises and assurances in these verses. And remember...this is GOD speaking.

- **“This is what the LORD says: I have redeemed you.”** Israelites who were poor or in debt would sometimes sell themselves as slaves. But a fellow Israelite could set them free. (See Leviticus 25.) To redeem someone was to pay the price that helpless person could not pay. To redeem someone was buy their freedom. God used the language of redemption to recall how He had rescued Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. And in the time Isaiah wrote these words, they promised that God would also free His people from exile in Babylon. But both of those events anticipated an even greater act of redemption. We read in Paul’s letter to Titus that **“our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness.”** (Titus 2:13-14) And Peter writes that **“you were redeemed from the empty way of life...with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.”** (I Peter 1:18-19) So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fear! Yes, you will endure the consequences of sin in this Genesis 3 world, but Christ has come and has redeemed you. By His blood your great God and Savior Jesus Christ has paid the wages of your sin and redeemed you from the eternal consequences of your sin. What it all means is simply this: In the name of Jesus your sins are forgiven, and in His name you are set free from condemnation – set free from guilt and the fear of punishment, set free from any question or doubt or uncertainty about where you stand with God! In fact, not only has He redeemed you FROM sin and condemnation, but He has redeemed you FOR eternal life with Him in heaven!

- **“This is what the LORD says: I have summoned you by name.”** God called Abraham by name and grew his line into the nation of Israel. Many in Israel turned away; they claimed to know God, but those were empty claims apart from true faith in Him. But to those who trusted in Him then and those who do so now, the LORD assures, **“I have summoned you by name”** – that is, “I know you.” As immense as “God so loved the world” is, His love for you is also intensely personal. In Baptism God personally adopted you into His family. (See Galatians 3:26-27.) And in the description of Jesus as our Good Shepherd He says that **“He calls His own sheep by name.”** (John 10:3) So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fear! The LORD knows you by name. And that means you can call on Him by name for help and endurance for all you face in this Genesis 3 world.
- **“This is what the LORD says: You are mine.”** I don’t know that I can adequately describe the awe and comfort of these words (but I will try). ...When I realize the sinner I am, I am overwhelmed that the Holy One would attach the possessive claim “mine” to ME. What kind of a God is this?! This is the God of grace who delights to redeem sinners, washing them clean, and calling them His own, His children. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fear! I say again, yes, you will endure the hurt and hardships of life in a Genesis 3 world. But do you think your Redeemer calls you “mine” only to turn His back on you and to abandon you in your deepest distress? No! The LORD is fiercely protective of all He calls “mine.” In fact He gave up His own – His one and only Son – so that He could call you “mine.” Such is His love for you!

Verse 2 has yet another promise and assurance for us so that we need not fear:

- **“This is what the LORD says: 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.”** We have a few stunning examples of this in Scripture. Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea on dry ground as they exited Egypt, and again through the waters of the Jordan River on dry ground as they entered the Promised Land. And about 100 years after Isaiah wrote these words, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego walked out of Nebuchadnezzar’s blazing fire unhurt, unsinged, and without even a scent of smoke. Our amazing God can do amazing things! But let us note that He did not rescue these men FROM the fire...but IN the fire! God could have saved them from being thrown into the fire, but no, they walked THROUGH the fire and He saved them IN the fire. This illustrates the truth that **“in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”** (Romans 8:28) So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fear! Even as you pass through waters that threaten to overwhelm you in 2024 and walk through flames that threaten to consume you in this Genesis 3 world, God will surely work it all for your eternal good, even beyond what you can see or understand. I know you may walk a path of great sorrows and this can lead to a great struggle of faith, but I plead with you: Please do not doubt His power and wisdom to do as He promises, and please do not doubt His loving goodness to do so. If you do, you are left with nothing. Instead, trust in the One who is your everything. Do not fear, and trust your Redeemer who says to you, **“I will be with you.”**

That promise, **“I will be with you,”** reminds us of Christmas and the ultimate way in which the LORD has shown Himself to be your Redeemer. God sent His Son, Immanuel, God with us, to redeem us. (See Galatians 4:4-5.). Understand this: Jesus came to pass through the waters and to walk through the flames for you. He lived His life for you in a Genesis 3 world – **“a man of sorrows,”** Isaiah later calls Him, **“familiar with suffering.”** (Isaiah 53:3) Jesus agonized and wept and suffered and bled and died in a Genesis 3 world, and He did all this to redeem a Genesis 3 world of people ruined and ravaged by sin. This isn't some distant, uncaring God. This is Immanuel, God with us, God near us, God for us – for you.

Dear friends, we do indeed live in a Genesis 3 world. This means you can expect hardships and suffering as you step into 2024, but this also means you can count on the faithful love and goodness of the LORD who sent you the Redeemer He promised in Genesis 3. Whenever you face fears of any kind in the new year – fears for your children or your parents or your spouse or your health or your job or the economy or our nation – take to heart the words of the LORD who points you past your fears to Him and His promises and assurances: **“Do not fear,”** He says, **“for I have redeemed you.”** Amen.