

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

A new student looks out on a field of strange faces in the high school cafeteria, wondering where he should sit, which group should he join, how will he be received? An older man lies in his sick bed. He had retired from a successful law practice, but his illness prevents him from doing much these days. He feels worthless. A young man drives toward his hometown. He had been away at a minimum-security prison for two years for misappropriating money at a local business in his hometown. How well will he be received?

We all ask those questions of Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy? We all have a need to belong. Abraham Maslow, a psychologist, developed a theory in 1943 called Maslow's hierarchy of needs. The top of the hierarchy was self-actualization. When one achieved this level, the person is at a level of full potential, one is able to become the most that one can be. There were lower levels of needs that need to be met before one could rise to self-actualization. The first or lowest need was, of course, physical needs: food, water, shelter. Another level is that of belongingness. Humans, you and I, need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance among their social groups, whether large or small. The need for belonging comes to the forefront in adolescence and young adulthood, and never really go away. We all need to experience belongingness to live a full, good life.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that the people of Israel belonged to God, and boy did they need to hear that at that time. They had been bloodied, bruised, and beleaguered. God had punished Israel for its arrogance and disobedience. God had permitted the Babylonians to conquer Israel, who destroyed much of Israel's property,

and sent many of the Israelites into exile in a strange land, the land of Babylon. The Israelites wondered if their God had abandoned them because of their Babylonian captivity, but God declared they were still God's people. But now Isaiah declares God's message, God's good news: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." The one who made them had not turned away from them. God still claims Israel and holds on to them.

This is a very appropriate Old Testament passage to pair with the gospel reading of Jesus' baptism. And it is a very appropriate reading as we baptize Ilah today. The sacrament of baptism declares that Ilah is a child of God. Baptism is a sign that we belong to God. It is God's way of saying that we are worthy. In the baptism rite we declare, "She has become a member of the household of God, to share with us in the priesthood of Christ. Welcome to the family of God, and to Christ's ministry with us!" In this gospel lesson of Jesus' baptism, God declares, "This is my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased." Likewise, when we baptize, God is declaring "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased. In this sacrament we declare that Ilah belongs to God and is a member of the household of God, the church.

For people who need to experience belongingness in their lives, the reformed faith has good news. Those churches that are a part of the reformed faith baptize infants. Ilah, at her young age, is incapable of earning God's grace, deserving God's grace and love. It is a very powerful reminder to us that there is nothing you and I can do to deserve belonging to God. God proclaims that we belong to him long before we even know who God is; even before we are capable of responding to God's love. When we baptize adults, the emphasis is still on God acting first. The focus is not to be on

what the person has done, as though because they have decided they want to be baptized, they now deserve to be baptized. None of us deserve to be baptized. It is because of God's love and grace that we are baptized. God loves us, accepts us, declares we are worthy, before we can do anything about it. God simply declares, "You are worthy! You are mine! You belong to the household of God! We belong! In this act of baptism, God friends us on Facebook even before we have a chance to submit a friend request, and God has all of our pictures on God's wall! In the words of Carter Lester, a Presbyterian pastor, "Our sense of belonging comes not from the acceptance of our peers, ...but from the One who claims us and will never let us go. What makes us worthy is not our individual achievements...but God's gracious love." God called Israel precious in God's sight, despite Israel's sins. Therefore, when we fail and fall, as we inevitably will, we can take comfort in the realization that our failures do not prompt God to quit loving us or laying claim to us.

As members of God's household we have an important role to play in helping people experience a sense of belonging; we are to be God's agents in including others, helping others to feel that they belong to God and to the household of God. God uses us to declare, in words and deeds, that God loves them.

Leighton Farrell tells the story of a "childless couple who wanted to adopt a little boy approximately 6 years old. They had visited several adoption agencies and finally found a child that was a match for their family. As they visited with the child, the wife said, 'If you would come and live with us, you could have your own private room, a nice yard with play equipment and all the toys and clothes you could ever want. Would you like to come and live with us?' The little boy hesitated a moment and said, 'No, I don't

think so.' The couple was stunned. They felt that they had offered the child everything a child could want. The husband said to the boy, 'We've offered you everything anyone could want. What more do you want?' In words far beyond his years, the child replied, 'I just want someone to love me.'" God loves us.

And in the temple of the Lord,  
the people of God say: Glory! **Amen.**