

You Are Not Forgotten
Series – “Eight Encouraging Words”
Isaiah 43:1-7
September 8, 2024
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These days we seem to spend a fair amount of our time alone. This didn't start with the pandemic, but the pandemic certainly made it worse. Studies show that many teens are on their phones a lot, but they're not always connecting with friends. They report feeling lonely, discouraged, even forgotten. That's a big reason why we're going to spend much of our confirmation time this year in small groups – connecting, caring, and finding healthy ways to be together.

Many of our seniors seem to be experiencing something similar. They're also spending too much time alone. They're not necessarily on their phones, but they're not connecting with friends as regularly as they might. Like our teens, they report feeling lonely, discouraged, even forgotten. That's a big reason why we focus on Caring Ministry at Good Shepherd. It's also a reason why we're having a special event for those 80 and above on Thursday, October 10. An invitation will be coming soon. As with our teens, it's important that we connect and care and find healthy ways to be together.

There's a word I'd use to describe our current situation. It's called *languishing*. It's not burnout. It's not exactly depression or hopelessness. It's more a feeling of being joyless and aimless – *languishing*.

Some refer to languishing as the neglected middle child of mental health. It's the void between flourishing and depression. You're not functioning at full capacity. Languishing dulls your motivation, disrupts your ability to get things done, and can leave you feeling alone too much of the time.

Does any of this sound familiar? It may or not be what you've been experiencing, but you probably know someone who has. Languishing might have been what the people of Israel were experiencing when they were in exile in Babylon. We talked about the exile last week, but allow me to add a bit more of the backstory. In the early 6th century B.C., the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar invaded the land of Israel. There was widespread destruction. Specifically, in 587 B.C. the Babylonian armies marched into Jerusalem. The city was sacked. The temple was destroyed. And a good many people were either captured or killed. On top of that, prominent citizens were

required to leave behind their homes, or what was left of them, and they were forced into exile in Babylon.

This was ancient Israel's beginning of languishing, only it went on, not for months, but for years – upwards of 70 years. Many were separated from their families. In their religious life, they were cut off from the temple. The annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem came to a halt and their sacrifices stopped. It was not unlike Thanksgiving, Christmas, and the 4th of July all coming to an end at the same time.

Depending on which prophet was doing the preaching, there was a sinking feeling that they'd brought this on themselves – with their greed and pride and neglect of God and neighbor. They couldn't help but wonder if God was angry at them, punishing them for their sins and mistakes.

As time wore on, they were tempted to believe that the gods of Babylon were more powerful than the god of Israel. The name for their God was Yahweh, which we translate as "Lord." But now Babylon was in power. They'd won the war. Maybe Yahweh wasn't as strong as they thought. Or worse, maybe Yahweh had forgotten them.

Our scripture reading for today comes out of the awful burden of exile. The children of Israel are languishing. The loneliness and isolation are dragging on and on. They so want things to be normal again.

Then one day, along comes a new voice, a prophet in the line of Isaiah of old. He starts with words of tenderness: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Today's reading comes a few chapters after these comforting words and it takes them a step further. It's intended for people at the end of their rope, who can barely believe that Yahweh still cares about them.

Listen to the words again: "Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you."

These words are meant to encourage them. But here's the deal, I doubt if Israel could believe them. They'd been languishing for too long. They'd been feeling alone and forgotten. They had to be wondering: "Does Yahweh care one wit about us?"

Maybe a story can help us understand the exiles' plight. In 1989 a movie came out called *The Bear*. Perhaps you've seen it along the way. It's the tender tale of a tiny bear cub whose mother is killed in a rockslide. The cub survives, but the viewer knows that his long-term chances of survival are slim.

Then the unexpected happens. The little cub gets adopted by an enormous Kodiak. This giant is always watching over the cub. He protects it from a mountain lion that's stalking him. He teaches the cub how to be a bear. Everything the father bear does, the cub imitates. He wades into a stream and stabs a fish. He stands on two legs and scratches his back against a tree. As the movie goes on, you start hoping against hope that the little cub might survive after all.

Then one day these two get separated. The little bear can't find his father anywhere. But the mountain lion has never lost track of the cub. He senses an opportunity. He comes silently, swiftly, face-to-face with the cub. He's about to spring. The frightened little bear does what he's seen his father do. He rears up on his hind legs, lifts his paws, and tries to growl fiercely. But the best he can manage is a fearful little squeak. The mountain lion is not deterred. Both the cub and his attacker sense he's about to die.

The camera focuses on the mountain lion, whose face suddenly registers a look of fear. He stops snarling, turns, and slinks away. The camera returns to the cub. He is as surprised as anyone watching. Could his squeaky little growl have worked so well? Then the camera pans back, and we see what we did not see before. We see what the cub cannot see. Behind the little bear is the great Kodiak, standing on his hind legs, his massive body poised to save his son with a single swipe. Big paws! Fierce growl!

Just then we know: the little bear had nothing to worry about. The cub couldn't see or hear him, but the father was there all along. The father could be trusted, even when he seemed to be absent, even when the cub felt alone and forgotten.

Friends, we know this story, don't we? There are plenty of times in the Bible when the children of Israel had to learn to trust their God again and again. They could stand up to Pharaoh in Egypt. They could march around Jericho and watch the walls come tumbling down. They could take on the Goliaths of this world. And now, they could turn away from the shimmering gods of Babylon and once again believe that Yahweh has not forgotten them. *Big paws. Fierce growl.* Truly, they are safely in God's care.

The prophet in the line of Isaiah puts it something like this: "You are the beloved children of God. And you believe in a great big God! Even if you can't always see or hear this God, he is always with you, he is always keeping an eye on you."

And next comes the centerpiece of God's word to the exiles, some of the most beautiful words in all of scripture: "For I am the Lord your God, the holy One of Israel, your Savior....For you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Friends, could you use a God like that in your life? I'm thinking you could. Here's an idea. Write down these words on a card and carry them with you: "For you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Indeed, you are beloved of God. You may be in a season of languishing, and you may often feel alone, but keep trusting. You are not alone. You are not forgotten.

What if you carried these words with you every day? Carry them long enough, and you'll soon have them in your heart. When you're tempted to languish, take out the card and claim the promise. When you're tempted to despair because of a mistake you've made, take out the card and claim the promise. When you wake up early and are anxious about the day, take out the card and claim the promise.

Friends, never doubt that the God who loves you is greater than you can imagine. You may not be able to see or hear this God, but God can see and hear you. God is watching. And God has not forgotten you. *Big paws. Fierce growl.* And why? Because" – as God says to each of us – "you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Amen.