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Words of Love

Luke 3:22b

In her novel *Gilead* Marilynne Robinson weaves the story of a Congregationalist minister in a small town in Iowa named John Ames. Ames is married in his old age to a young woman who bears him a son. He is suffering from congestive heart failure and approaching the end of his life. Before he dies he wants to write something about himself and his family for his son to read after his death. These words are directed to his son:

I'm writing this in part to tell you that if you ever wonder what you've done in your life, and everyone does wonder sooner or later, you have given God's grace to me, a miracle, something more than a miracle. You may not remember me very well at all, and it may seem to you to be no great thing to have been the good child of an old man in a shabby little town you will no doubt leave behind. If only I had the words to tell you.

There's a shimmer on a child's hair in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, tiny soft beams of just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes. They're in the petals of flowers, and they're on a child's skin. Your hair is straight and dark, and your skin is very fair. I suppose you're not prettier than most children. You're just a nice-looking boy, a bit slight, well scrubbed and well mannered. All that is fine, but it's your existence I love you for, mainly. Existence seems to me now the most remarkable thing that could ever be imagined (*Gilead*, pages 52-53).

As Ames looks beyond the moment of his death he wants his son to remember who he is. He should not see himself as an unfortunate small town boy growing up without a father. He should see himself as a child who is loved deeply. That is who he is.

In the 43rd chapter of Isaiah the prophet is writing to his people to let them know who they are. They are preparing for a long journey. The long night of their exile is about to come to an end. The time for their release is at hand. They will soon be making the journey home. They will be facing new challenges which will require a new perspective on their part. As they emerge from exile they must leave behind the mindset of people who have been victimized. They must become people who can build for the future.

The prophet speaks of this transition by using the imagery of "the waters." He says that they have passed through "the waters." This imagery goes all the way back to creation when God tamed the waters of chaos to create a world where human beings could live. In the same way God stood by the people in the chaos of their exile. God led them through those terrible days and now they are at the threshold of a new and promising future.

Isaiah wants the people to understand that they are not defined by the chaos of their exile. They are defined by God's love which has been with them every step of the way. Their future will be grounded in that love. Isaiah gives them the gift of a new way to see themselves.

Harold Recinos grew up in a very tough neighborhood in the South Bronx. He knew from childhood that the larger society had already defined him. He was defined as a loser and a danger to society. He was living on the streets before he became a teenager. During his four years on the streets he became addicted to heroin. For him drugs were not a matter of recreation or enjoyment, but survival. He writes:

Dope enabled me to go through restaurant garbage dumpsters in search of food to eat along with other homeless outcasts. It made it easier to drop out of junior high school. Junkiedom empowered me to beg others for money; wear the same clothing for months at a time, never noticing the stench; and sleep in the filth of condemned Bronx tenements. I met a Presbyterian minister who [was] engaged in street ministry to junkies. Most of the junkies were suspicious of him. I thought he was truly insane for coming to the south Bronx. By then I was a seasoned junkie who believed the language of “salvation” was a joke—good news for the comfortable and better off but a waste of time for the poor and nearly dead! All I wanted from him was a new set of clothes, a good meal on occasion, and money to get a fix. I did not want to be bothered about a “radically new possibility” for life in Christ! But he welcomed me into his family, got me off drugs, got me back in school, and showed me how to be in relationship to God (“Loud Shouts Count,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Volume XXVII, Number 2, New Series, 2006, pages 156-157).

Today Recinos is a theology professor at Southern Methodist University. His future was changed because someone gave him a new way to see himself. He was put in touch with a power that he never imagined existed; the power which comes from knowing that we are loved by God.

This is the power that Luke describes in the third chapter of his gospel. There we read that Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized. As Jesus steps into those waters he confronts the chaos of our world. He comes face to face with the destructive realities of poverty, injustice, hatred, and warfare. It is the first step in his journey to the cross. But in that water of chaos a powerful voice is heard, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased (Luke 3:22b).” It is these words of love that define Jesus’ life and mission.

And so it is for us. We are defined not by the chaos of our time but by the words of love said over us when we were baptized. By the power of these words we are grafted into Christ. That is who we are.