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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Ash Wednesday<sup>1</sup>

February 18, 2015

Text: Isaiah 41:14–16

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

People, ancient and modern, have always been fascinated with animals. We make stories about them; we make them almost human by giving them human characteristics and abilities such as talking, playing pranks, wearing clothes, and so forth (i.e., Aesop's fables, Lassie, Reepicheep, etc.). Sometimes we even imagine what it would be like to be one of those animals or at least possess some of their unique abilities. Have you ever imagined what it would be like to fly like a bird or roar like a lion or swim like a dolphin?

I'm pretty sure it's a safe bet that none of you have imagined being a worm. You fish with them. They aerate the ground. Sometimes biology classes dissect them but otherwise, worms don't make the cut in inspiring human imagination.

Well, that's not exactly true. The Bible refers to worms on a number of different occasions. Never in a positive way. The prophet Isaiah says in tonight's OT reading, "Fear not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel!" The Lord, through His inspired prophet, describes His people as a worm: weak, insignificant, lowly, and to some, maybe even disgusting. This definitely isn't the most flattering description of God's people.

Throughout these Lenten services, we will consider portions of God's Word from Isaiah 40–55. These chapters were especially targeted to God's people who would go into Babylonian exile. Living as a conquered people in a foreign land, God's people would be variously described as weak and weary, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, deaf and blind, childless, widowed, divorced, and a stubborn rebel from birth.

The exiles had seen terror on every side. The patriarchal and Davidic promises appeared to be null and void. The captives are caught in a culture where their most

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the sermon Series "Singing with the Exiles" published by Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 2015.

treasured narratives and liturgies are being mocked, trivialized, or dismissed as being simply irrelevant. Everything had been swallowed up by the beast called Babylon. This hopelessness is epitomized in Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” And then in verse 6 David says, “I am a worm and not a man.”

What should I think of myself when I am captive to sin and so far away from the Father? When I don’t “act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with my God” (Micah 6:8)? When I’m not aflame with holiness and feel no compassion for the lost? What am I to think of myself when I take no delight in the Word, recoil from prayer, harbor lustful thoughts, and pant for the praises of people? What am I when I am deceptive, mean-spirited, petty, and vindictive? Worm and not a man comes to mind.

I realize that we aren’t used to thinking about ourselves in this rather derogatory way. Although the hymn writer Isaac Watts wasn’t too timid to use it when he wrote the hymn we sang a few moments ago. Stanza 1: “Alas! And did my Savior bleed, And did my sov’rign die? Would He devote that sacred head For such a worm as I?” (LSB 437). That’s why we need to hear God’s Word. It reveals things about ourselves and our world that we wouldn’t know. In fact, God’s Word has any number of ways to describe our dire situation.

Lent helps us, like no other time of the year, to acknowledge that we are sinful and unclean in thought, word, and deed. Lent, like no other time of the year, guides us to repent before Almighty God. People who see themselves as God sees them are people who cry out for life and resurrection!

Listen to all of Isaiah 41:14, “For not, you worm Jacob, you men of Israel! I am the one who helps you, declares the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel.” The Lord God of heaven and earth isn’t some cheerleaders urging you on from the sidelines where it’s safe and comfortable. Heaven forbid. Our God gets involved with His people, with you and all who claim His name.

The word “redeemer” appears here in Isaiah 40–55 for the first time and will come eighteen more times in this section. In the Bible, a redeemer was your next-of-kin-relative who buys back your inheritance, frees you from slavery, and pays off your debt. Whatever has gone bad, your redeemer will make good (Job 19:25; 42:10).

Coupled with Redeemer is the phrase “the Holy One of Israel.” It appears in the book of Isaiah twenty-five times and only seven more times in the Old Testament. The Lord

is holy which means that He is completely set apart and different from everyone and everything else. There is only one holy one – the Lord of heaven and earth; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

In this wonderful phrase, the Holy One of Israel, Isaiah combines the saving concept of a kinsman Redeemer with the transcendence of God's absolute holiness. In this way, the God who is completely set apart and different from all of creation becomes united with our human situation; the Holy God becomes connected to us intimately and personally as our kinsmen Redeemer. In this beautiful and powerful way, Isaiah announces that the Lord alone is able to marshal every power in the universe for a single, loving and relentless purpose—to bring us love and life, forgiveness and salvation! To save the worm of humanity!!

In the fullness of time, God became our next-of-kin-relative. God's eternal Son, became flesh and blood by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is the Holy One of Israel, our kinsman Redeemer. But even that wasn't enough. He went even further by becoming dirty, despised, and rejected.

On the cross of Calvary, Jesus, the Holy One of Israel, cried out in utter dereliction, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" By so praying Psalm 22:1, Jesus was claiming the entire psalm including vs. 6, "I am a worm and not a man." Here is Jesus, nailed to the tree, bloody and tortured, mocked, ridiculed, and abandoned. Jesus became the worm, enduring His Father's judgment against sin and rebellion.

The Lord Jesus did all this for you, me, and all creation. He is the Redeemer. And because He became the worm subject to God's judgment, He also makes us into something beautiful and glorious. Isaiah describes it in vs. 15–16, "Behold, I make of you a threshing sledge, new, sharp, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff; you shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them. And you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory."

Worms become mountain movers, powerful and strong, lords over all creation! Since we began with animals maybe we should end with one. Isaiah writes, "but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint" (40:31). You see, that's what Lent tells us. The lowly and despised are redeemed, loved, lifted up, and transformed from death and degradation to life and glory. Our Lenten sackcloth

and ashes are not the last word. On Easter they will be exchanged for baptismal robes washed white in the blood of Jesus. And then our strength shall be renewed like the eagles. We shall rule as kings and priests in the Lord's new heavens and earth. The Holy One of Israel promises it. And it shall come to pass.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.