

Listen Up, You Worms!

A sermon based on Isaiah 41:14-16

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Listen up, you worms! When you first glanced at the sermon theme for this morning, what was your reaction? Did it get a little rise out of you? Now, I did tone down the typical line for you. At least I didn't call you, maggots, right? But is calling you worms really any better?

"Well, Pastor, this isn't boot camp. You're not a drill sergeant. We're not inferiors. You shouldn't talk to us like that. We're not just equals; we're children of God. We're here to love, support, encourage each other, not tear each other down!"

You're right. And that's exactly what God is doing for you this morning as he's the one calling you the worm. He's the one telling you to listen up. And so, as God speaks, listen up, you worm, because he's got a reason, not for you get offended but a reason for you to sing with the rest of the exiles.

Now, before we get to God's seemingly cryptic message to his "worms," I want to take a couple minutes to set the stage for this entire Lenten series, based on the book of Isaiah, "Singing with the Exiles."

If you know Isaiah's history, you would notice he wasn't actually around when the exile, or the Babylonian Captivity, took place. It was after his time. And yet, he still wrote about it...prophesied about it because God was concerned about the Israelites. They were already in the midst of living the kind of wicked lives God absolutely abhorred and was going to eventually punish by banishing his chosen people from their homes and their precious temple all the way to Babylon.

With the help of God, Isaiah saw that happening, and did two things. He warned the Israelites to turn from their ways, as if they could maybe avoid God's coming wrath. And then, because he knew those attempts would be futile, and the people would still eventually end up in captivity, he gave them encouragement.

And here it is, "**Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel...declares the Lord.**" Not a good start, is it? And those are God's words. Wouldn't you think he got the memo that calling someone a worm isn't the way to boost self-esteem or encourage people to get up and get going?

I mean, if you could become any animal in the world, which one would you choose? Maybe, like Isaiah, you would soar on wings like an eagle. Or, like Amos, perhaps the lion is your animal of choice because you love the strength and beauty of the king of the jungle. Or maybe, like Elisha, you boast in the bear because, when it comes to obstacles, you maim and you maul. Or if your name is Caleb—which in Hebrew means "dog"—you just might choose to be a sweet and adorable little dog.

But a worm?!?! How many of you would like to become a worm? That's what I thought. None of you are worm wannabes! I don't blame you. Worms have no arms, no legs, no eyes! They're small and insignificant and, if you ask me, worms don't have the best of personalities!

And that's not all. In addition to being called worms, God also called the Israel "little." Some even translate that word as "dead ones." Seems to me like God just heaping insult upon insult, kicking a broken people when they were already down for the count.

Because that's where Israel would be. Buried under the boot of Babylon, throughout Isaiah 40–55 the exiles are also called weak and weary, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, deaf and blind, childless, widowed, divorced, and a stubborn rebel from birth. They even viewed themselves as cursed and left for dead. Or to summarize, God has a word for that: worm. And that was God's lead-in to give the Israelites comfort and hope and encouragement.

Well, we're not in physical exile, like the Israelites were, but our situation is really not unlike theirs. Living in a sinful world, being sinners ourselves, we need some encouragement, too. So, listen up you worm! If it was ok for God to use that kind of language to encourage the Israelites, it should work for you, too, right?

So, are you encouraged? Or are you offended? I don't think too many people would take too kindly to being called that, especially living in our kinder, gentler world. That's not PC at all. Maybe you're even thinking, "Pastor, didn't you get the memo that calling people a worm isn't the way to boost self-esteem or encourage us to get up and get going? It's not going to win you many friends!"

Well, let me ask you this? What should you and I think of ourselves when we are captive to sin and so far away from the Father? When we don't "**act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with [our] God,**" as God tells us to in his Word? When we're not always on fire for holy living and feel no compassion for the lost? What are we to think of ourselves when we take no delight in the Word (meaning not being excited about worship or studying God's Word on our own), or when we recoil from prayer, harbor lustful, angry, hateful, greedy, covetous thoughts, and strive only for the praises of people? What are we when we are deceptive, mean-spirited, petty, and vindictive? God has a word for that: worm.

You know, one thing I appreciate about many of the Lenten hymns in our hymnal are the way they sober us up, really strike a chord in our nerves as they point out our sin and what that sin deserves, really, the hopelessness of our situation. One of the familiar hymns, "Alas and Did My Savior Bleed," has this line, "Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I."

As convicting that line is, I actually like the rendition the Missouri Synod hymnal has better. It's, "Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." Take a look in the mirror of your heart, ask yourself those penetrating questions, and you'd see you're no better than a dirt dweller.

And our fate, yes, because of our own sinfulness, we belong in the dirt where those worms will feast on our dead flesh. And if that's where our punishment ended, that would be a joy compared to what our real curse is. We deserve to be condemned to the eternity of hell, where Jesus says **'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'**

Encouraged? Maybe...or maybe you're more reflective...hopefully even humbled. You see, there's a reason why God calls Israel (and you and me as well) a worm here. Describing all of us as "worms" and "little" here provides a lesson in humility. Without God, Israel was weak and helpless. Without God, so are we.

And the opposite, thinking highly of ourselves, has nothing to do with God's Word. Rather he wants us to own up to who we are without him. He wants us to cry out with Isaiah, "**I am a man of unclean lips**"; and with Job, "**Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes**"; and with Paul, "**O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death!**"

This is what Lent is all about. It's acknowledging who we are in God's sight—sinful and unclean in thought, word, and deed. Lent is when we confess these sins, grieve over them, and repent before Almighty God. You see, it's only worms who are lying in the dirt, wriggling around in the mud, that cry out to be picked up and lifted out of it!

And when we do? Well, no one ever stops their car and says, "Hey everyone, take a look at that worm!" When have you read an editorial that passionately argued, "We must cease the ongoing genocidal atrocity taking place in our lakes and rivers! Worms deserve better! These cute creatures should not be skewered on hooks, just so they can be fed to the fish!"

No one should care a lick about us worms, and rightfully so. But God does. Jesus does. Our Savior does. When we humble ourselves—literally get low to the dirt—admitting to be the worms or even maggots that we are, then God has a word of comfort for us. So listen up, you worms! Hear the Word of the Lord in Isaiah 41:14, **"Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel, for I myself will help you,' declares the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."**

Now, the Lord is not some football coach trying to rally his team to "win one for the Gipper." Nor is He some talk-show host who wants us to feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Our God is not some sentimental grandpa who helps those who help themselves. No. He is **"your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel."**

A redeemer, in Israelite culture, was your next-of-kin-relative who would buy back your inheritance, free you from slavery, and pay off your debt. Whatever went bad, your redeemer would make good.

So how did God redeem us? How did he help us? By becoming a worm like us! Would anyone here seriously volunteer to become a maggot? Would you take on the flesh of a leech to save other leeches? Yet, in the fullness of time, God humbled himself. He came low to the dirt—to this earth. He became our next-of-kin-relative, literally!—taking on human flesh. And the gap between God and human is much greater than the gap between us and a leech!

And as "the Holy One of Israel" he lived a perfectly sinless life. He was not a maggot because of his sin, but because of ours. He never got dirty with pride or greed or lust. He always loved, always served, always did what was right—for us.

And then He took another step. He became dirty, despised, and dismissed. And then he took another step. He was tortured, whipped, scourged. And then he took another step. And he went to the cross.

And there, from that cross, he quoted Psalm 22:1 when he cried, **"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani?"** And seeing those words, the prophecy, point to Jesus, we can't help but think of Psalm 22:6 as, **"I am a worm and not a man."** Here is Jesus, the God man, nailed to a tree, his body bent and broken, tortured and twisted. Here is Jesus, a bloody mess. Here is Jesus, mocked, ridiculed, and abandoned. Here is Jesus, the worm, Jesus, the maggot.

Now listen up, you worms! He did it all for you! He did it to take your sin away. And it's gone! He did it to lift you up out of the dirt and the mud. And he has! By the power of his Word, he's made you into something new: **"See, I am making you into a threshing sledge, new and sharp, with many teeth. You will thresh the mountains and crush them, and reduce the hills to chaff. You shall winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them."**

Leeches are lifted up! Worms become winners! Maggots move mountains! The once lowly and despised are now victorious over every enemy—over Satan, over sin, over death (seeming indestructible mountains and hills)—and crush them underfoot! Our Lenten sackcloth and ashes are not the last word. But, in Jesus, we receive a robe of righteousness.

So listen up, you worms, now worms no more! We're not even bears, or lions, or eagles! We're victorious, sinless, saints! And we no longer wallow in the dirt and in the mud of sin, but "**rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel,**" and live for him in thanks every day of our lives! So again, rejoice in the Lord and glory in the Holy One of Israel, your Redeemer. Amen.