

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Isaiah 41:14-16 Fear 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. ¹⁵ 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; ¹⁶ 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.

God Has a Word for That

If you could become any animal in the world, which one would you choose? I asked my sons that last night as we sat around a bonfire in our backyard. One of them said he'd like to be a peacock. When asked why a peacock, he said so that he could eat beans and grass. I'm not sure he had a full grasp on the concept. My other boy said he'd like to be a fish that could swim underwater. And hearing that, the first changed his answer to a shark because shark eat fish, so perhaps he did understand after all. I said I'd be an eagle, and I explained that way I could soar high above the earth. I think the prophet Isaiah might agree with my choice. He too spoke about eagles in the chapter just before the one we're considering this morning, and provided great hope to the exiled Children of Israel: ***"They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles."*** (Isaiah 40:31a)

Peacock, fish, shark, eagle, there are thousands of answers one could give to that question. But let me ask you another question: Show of hands, how many of you would like to become a worm? That's just what I thought. None of you would choose to swap places with a worm, and I don't blame you. Worms have no arms, no legs, no eyes! They're small and insignificant and easily squashed underfoot.

A person might park the car if they see an eight point buck standing by the road, but no one ever stops their car and says, "Hey everyone, take a look at that worm!" There are many activists fighting for all sorts of rights for various species of animals, but when have you read an editorial that passionately argued against the cruel treatment of worms by fishermen everywhere. There are no worm apologists.

Can you imagine the worm being the mascot of a sports team? Will we ever hear of the Los Angeles Leaches or the Michigan Maggots or the Washington University Worms? Probably not.

Well, that's exactly the picture that God uses in our text as He speaks to His people Israel: He says, "Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob." Now, He's speaking to the Children of Israel through the Prophet Isaiah while they are not in their homeland. As a judgment against their constant idolatry, God allowed the Babylonians to destroy their homes and carry His people away into captivity. And a fair amount of the Book of Isaiah exists as a call of encouragement to the faithful few that remained. So, understanding that background, why does God call the exiled community in Babylon a "worm"? Doesn't God know that calling someone a worm isn't exactly a big boost to their self-esteem? What hope can you have when your God is calling you worms? So why use this description?

Buried under the boot of Babylon as they are, in Isaiah chapters 40–55, God also refers to His people as weak and weary, bruised reeds and smoldering wicks, deaf and blind, childless, widowed, divorced, and a stubborn rebel from birth. Or, you could say God has a word for all that: they were worms.

The point of this imagery is that as we hear God addressing them, “O worm Jacob,” we realize that He’s essentially calling them “dead.” Throughout Scripture, and especially throughout the book of Isaiah, worms are very closely related to death. In Isaiah 14, God is speaking to the King and announcing his downfall, He says, **“maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers.”** (Isaiah 14:11) In Isaiah 66, God declares that for those who are damned, **“Their worm shall not die.”** (Isaiah 66:24a) In calling them worms, God’s wants them to realize just how dead they are.

And certainly, they must have felt that way. The exiles lived with terror on every side. The promises that God had made to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and King David—those appeared to now be null and void. They were forced to live in a culture where their most treasured histories and songs are mocked, trivialized, and dismissed as being simply irrelevant. Everything that they held dear had been swallowed up by the beast called Babylon. I wouldn’t be surprised if the Psalm most often on their lips during captivity was Psalm 22, **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? . . . I am a worm and not a man.”** (v. 1,6)

So, we understand why the Israelites should have thought of themselves as worms, but why would I be considered as such? Well, how should we consider ourselves when we are held so captive by the sins that we love and find ourselves departing so far from God? What do you think we should call ourselves, when we don’t **“act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with my God”** (Micah 6:8)? What should we be called when we become complacent in our faith and feel no compassion for the lost? What am I to think of myself when I take no delight in God’s Word, when recoil from prayer, when I harbor lustful thoughts, and when I pant for the praises of people? What am I when I am deceptive, mean-spirited, petty, and vindictive? God has a word for that: worm.

Yes, God has the same word for you and me that he reserved for His people Israel: we are worms. And let’s not resist that designation, for God longs for His worms to cry out with Isaiah, **“I am a man of unclean lips”**; (Isaiah 6:5) and with Job, **“Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”** (Job 42:6); God wants us to cry out together with Paul, **“O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death!”** (Romans 7:24) And that is what this season of Lent is all about. It is acknowledging who we are in God’s sight—nothing but worms—sinful and unclean in thought, word, and deed. We ought to use this time of year to confess these sins, to grieve over them, and repent before Almighty God. For only people who are dead and buried and surrounded by dirt, like worms, only they can cry out for life and resurrection!

So worms, hear the Word of the Lord from verse 14 of our text, **“Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O men of Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”**

God is not acting here as some football coach trying to rally his team to “win one for the Gipper.” He’s not trying to motivate us to pick ourselves up out of the mud and the dirt. No, He gives us a different solution. Namely, Himself. He is **“your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel,”** our text says.

That word “redeemer” it appears eighteen more times in following chapters of Isaiah. This is an important concept to this section of the book. When we hear the word “redeemer” we quickly think of Jesus, but before we get there, let’s just consider that word by itself. A redeemer in the legal terms of the day is your next-of-kin-relative who buys back your inheritance, frees you from slavery, and pays off your debt. Whatever has gone bad, your kinsman redeemer will make good (Job 19:25; 42:10).

How does this work for us? In the fullness of time, God sent the Holy One to be born of a woman, to be born under the law. In essence, God sent His Son to become our next-of-kin-relative. And then He took another step. He became dirty, despised, and dismissed by mankind. And then He took another step, lowering himself even deeper and was nailed to the cross. There he cried out “Eli, Eli, lama sabathani.” He was quoting from Psalm 22, **“My God, My God, why have You forsaken me.”** Or as that Psalm goes on to say, **“I am a worm and not a man.”** There hangs Jesus, nailed to the tree, body bent and twisted. There is Jesus, mocked, ridiculed, unloved, and abandoned. And God has a word for that: worm.

That’s what Jesus was willing to become, and He did it all for you. He took on the same pronouncement of worm-hood that God had declared for us. And so, God’s transforming Word to us is exactly this: our next two verses, **“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 have become mountain movers! The lowly and despised are loved and lifted up. For our Lenten sackcloth and ashes are not the final word. On Easter they will be exchanged for baptismal robes washed white in the blood of Jesus. So we are worms due to our sin, just like worms, spiritually we are blind, we are lame, unable to do anything to help ourselves. So then thanks be to Jesus, who declares that because of Him, **“The blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the gospel is preached to the poor”** (Matthew 11:5). God has a word for that. Grace! Grace which He stretches out to you and me in abundant supply. Thanks be to God. Amen.