

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**Isaiah 44:1-5** *"But now hear, O Jacob my servant, Israel whom I have chosen! <sup>2</sup> Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen. <sup>3</sup> For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. <sup>4</sup> They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams. <sup>5</sup> This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and name himself by the name of Israel."*

In 2003, an author by the name of Shelley Jackson set out to write her most ambitious project, which was a 2,095-word story called *Skin*. The ambitious part of the project was that it would never be written down on paper or published or recorded, it would only be tattooed word by word on 2,095 individual volunteers. When they were tattooed, they would become known only by that one word. She explains her project as a living story: as the volunteers die, their word in the story will die with them, altering the story, until, eventually, the story is dead altogether.

A bit of strange project if you ask me. If it was being created in the present day, I don't think I would be one to submit my skin to be a part of the project. But a lot of people were eager to take part. 10's of thousands of volunteers applied to be a part of what Mrs. Jackson described as a counter-cultural narrative, and she remarked that it was very difficult to narrow down the list of volunteers to determine who would receive a word as their mark.

Maybe that's not something you'd be interested in, but surprisingly, the prophet Isaiah describes a similar project in our text before us this morning. He also wants people to be marked with one word and be part of a counter-cultural narrative. He describes this in the final verse of our text, ***"This one will say, 'I am the LORD's,' another will call on the name of Jacob, and another will write on his hand, 'The LORD's,' and name himself by the name of Israel."***

One of the ancient Near East's popular narratives in the sixth century BC was the Babylonian epic called the *Enuma Elish*. It's a story about creation. *Enuma Elish* tells the story about a fictional god by the name of Marduk who battles against another god, a sea-dragon type of creature by the name of Tiamat. After defeating Tiamat, Marduk cut her in two and built the universe out of her remains. And each year, these ancient Babylonian people would read this narrative and re-enact the defeat of Tiamat during their annual Akitu festival. It was a feast which would reach its climax when the people shouted out together, "Marduk is King!"

Connected to this ancient Babylonian religion was the empire's treatment of the people it conquered. Perhaps you already know this, but whenever the Babylonians conquered people and brought them to live as their captives in Babylon, they would give them new names. You know a few examples of this. Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah are three such examples from the Bible, but you probably know them better by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You know all about their friend too, who was given the name Belteshazzar, although you probably know him better by his Hebrew name, Daniel. What was the point of all this renaming? They marked them with new names to try to coerce their Jewish captives into worshipping Marduk instead of worshipping Jehovah God.

Nevertheless, the Lord did not forget His people. He cries out to His people immersed in this Babylonian narrative, inviting them to tattoo themselves as part of an anti-Babylonian narrative, or as Isaiah says, ***“write on [your] hand, “The Lord’s.”*** That’s just one word in the Hebrew, *leyaweh*, *“Belonging to the Lord.”* It would be a counter-cultural confession declaring, “I do not belong to Marduk, I do not belong to Babylon, I belong to the Jehovah God.” But, sadly, the people of Israel were *not* lining up to be branded as “the Lord’s,” because whereas they used to cry out with longing, “There’s no place like home,” now they’d grown comfortable and declared, “There’s no place like Babylon.” They’d become engrained in the culture, and many no longer cared if they ever left.

We, too, find ourselves living in a modern-day Babylon. And God similarly calls on us today that though we are living in Babylon, we are not to live like the Babylonians! We have been marked by God as His very own special people, and as such we are reminded that this is *not* our home, and there’s no place like our home.

Nevertheless, we are tempted by the offerings of this Babylon in which we live. The most popular narrative in our day is also about a false god, that is the idol known as earthly peace and bliss. It is spun by the young and the rich and the beautiful, the influencers if you will, who guarantee that you too can be young and beautiful and happy if you buy things you don’t need with the money that you don’t have in order to impress the people you don’t even really like. This narrative is hammered into our heads daily. We are indoctrinated by ads and images and social justice campaigns which are designed to convince us that we can create a paradise for ourselves right here in Babylon.

This is all part of the enemy’s initiative of changing each of our names. His goal? To mark us with a new name that will be enticed by finding our ultimate fulfillment in stuff, in the present time here in this world. We have been deemed beloved through the washing of the waters of Baptism together with God’s Word, and yet the Devil would rename “cheap, dirty, worthless.” We have been called redeemed and cleansed in the name of Jesus, but the Devil refers to us as, “Guilty as charged.” God tells us, we’re a ***“chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God,”*** (1 Peter 2:9) but that Ancient Father of Lies boasts, “It’s all just a figment of your imagination, real joy is to be found here.” And eating up these lies, we jump at the opportunities of fleeting fulfillment.

The devil, together with the narrative of our day, strive to create in us a slowness to be a part of God’s counter-cultural calling. He convinces us that being marked as different from the world would be uncomfortable, and so we often convince ourselves, “I can have the best that this American dream has to offer, I can enjoy the prosperity and comforts of life, AND at the same time, I can profess the name of Jesus as my Savior.” And as we’ve all no doubt discovered, there’s just no satisfaction in any of it. We’re worn out by this narrative, as we just can’t keep up, we just can’t find any sort of peace that our American/Babylonian narrative promises. We need an alternative narrative.

Enter Isaiah chapters 40-55, where the prophet takes dead aim at that empire. He cries out to the Hebrew captives and calls Babylon nothing, just a drop in the bucket in chapter 40 (12). A few verses later, he declares Babylonian leaders are nothing. (23) The Babylonian gods he refers to as empty wind in chapter 41:29. Marduk is a fantasy, a fake, a fraud, a huge phony and nothing more.

And the counter-cultural narrative in Isaiah chapters 40-55 is just getting started. ***“Comfort, comfort My people, says your God,”*** early in chapter 40. (1) ***“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing,”*** he promises in chapter 43. Your time here floundering in Babylon is about to end for He promises to raise up a King, Cyrus by name, who would free His people, to us He promised to send His Son to free us from our Babylonian captivity to a sinful world.

His whole plan is summarized in chapter 52, when Isaiah declares, ***“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God is King.’”*** Taking another shot against Babylon and every other satanic narrative which changes quickly and fails to satisfy, the Lord maintains in chapter 40 that His narrative will last forever. ***“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”*** (Isaiah 40:8) And He promises that the narrative He is creating will do what it says. In chapter 55, ***“So shall my word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose.”*** (11) And the beautiful thing about this whole counter-cultural narrative—all of these promises are directed at us. We are the subject in God’s story, so that we may line up and write upon our hands, not that we belong to Babylon, but, *leyaweh*, “I am the Lord’s.”

Frequently throughout Scripture, God tells His story by marking it on people’s bodies, on their skin. In Genesis 17, God sets Abraham and His offspring as separate and blessed through the covenant mark of circumcision. Deuteronomy 6:8 describes God’s people tying His words and promises on their hands and binding them to their foreheads. In Ezekiel 9, God commands the prophet to pass through Jerusalem and mark the faithful on their foreheads in ink, so that they would be spared His from His coming judgment.

And it all points to the most awesome story ever told in human skin. Isaiah describes this flesh, this body, this story told in skin, saying, ***“His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, and His form marred beyond human likeness. . . Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not. . . All we, like sheep, have gone astray. And the LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all.”*** (Is. 52:14; 53:3, 6) Then the one who allowed His own skin to be marked in such a way speaks, in Isaiah chapter 50, ***“I gave My back to those who strike, and My cheeks to those who pull out the beard; I did not hide My face from mocking and spitting.”*** (60) One spear, three nails, a crown of thorns—they all left their marks on Jesus as His life left Him.

And then Easter came. The women saw him, then the ten disciples in the upper room, then doubting Thomas was shown the nail holes in His hands, the wound in His side—all of them seeing Jesus in His own flesh. Our Savior showed His skin, still marked, forever marked with the scars which announce that you, right here, right now, are the recipients of His love and forgiveness and everlasting grace. And because of this, we now too, can line up to be marked by Him. We are now a part of this counter-cultural narrative which says, “This is not my home, I’m but a stranger here, heaven is my home.”

To be a part of this counter-cultural narrative, all we need is one word: *leyahweh*—in English, ***“Belonging to the Lord.”*** How does that happen? Well, it’s already been done for you. In the waters of your Baptism, God marked you. It was true when the pastor said, “Receive the sign of the cross, both upon your forehead and upon your heart.” In that sacred washing, you were connected to Christ Jesus your Savior, His name was put over your own name, you were set apart from the rest of the world as belonging to God.

So yes, we still live in Babylon. But just because we live here does not mean we will live like the Babylonians. Our lives can tell another story. We’re interested in another narrative. What is that story called? It’s the same Word with which we’ve been branded: Belonging to Christ. Amen.