

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.

Here’s another question: How many of you would like to become a worm? May I see a show of hands? That’s just what I thought. None of you are worm wannabes! I don’t blame you. Worms have no arms, no legs, and no eyes! They’re small and insignificant and, if you ask me, worms don’t have the best of personalities!

No one ever stops their car and says, “Hey everyone, take a look at that worm! Isn’t it amazing?” Can you imagine the worm being any team’s mascot? Will we ever hear of the Minnesota Maggots or the Wisconsin Worms or how about the Glencoe – Silver Lake Leaches? I don’t think so.

Our text in Isaiah 41:14 calls God’s people a worm: “Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob.” Why does God call the exiles from Judah and now forced to live in Babylon a worm? Didn’t He get the memo that calling someone a worm isn’t the way to boost self-esteem or encourage people to get up and get going?

Buried under the boot of the empire of Babylon, in 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. God has a word for that: worm.

Isaiah does an interesting thing with words in our reading. The parallel thought in our text equates “O worm Jacob” with “those who are dead.” Isaiah’s poetic parallelism invites us to compare dead people with worms. Dead people are buried—so are worms. Dead people are stepped on—so are worms. Dead people are surrounded by dirt—so are worms. Most dead people are ignored and soon forgotten—and so are the worms.

The exiles had seen terror on every side. God’s promises to Father Abraham and later to King David appeared to be null and void. The captives are caught in a culture where their most 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.”

Now, 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 have no desire to read God’s Word or to pray to Him? How about when I harbor angry thoughts or crave the praises of people? What am I when I am deceptive, mean-spirited, petty, and vindictive? God has a word for that: worm.

“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?”

No, I didn’t. Because thinking highly of ourselves has nothing to do with God’s Word. Quite the contrary He longs for 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 is 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, only people who are dead and buried and surrounded by dirt cry out for life and resurrection!

Hear the Word of the Lord. Isaiah 41:14, “Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O dead ones of Israel, for I myself will help you, declares the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.”

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 warm and fuzzy all over. Our God is not a sentimental grandpa who helps those who help themselves. No.

He is “your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.” The word “redeemer” appears here in Isaiah 40–55 for the first time and will come eighteen more times in this section. In the Old Testament, a redeemer 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 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 other times in the rest of the Old Testament. He is, as the seraphim cry out, “holy, holy, holy!” It means

the Lord is completely set apart and different from everyone and everything else.

Isaiah couples your Redeemer—the completely immanent One, the One Who comes so very close to you—with the Holy One of Israel—the completely transcendent One, the One Who is so high above us. In this way, Isaiah announces that the Lord alone is able to marshal **every** power in the universe for a single, loving, and relentless goal—to bring us love and life, forgiveness and salvation!

How does He do it? In the fullness of time, God became our next-of-kin-relative, literally. And then He took another step. He became dirty, despised, and dismissed. But then He took another, almost incomprehensible step. It was one for the ages.

Psalm 22:1, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Or, in His native Aramaic language, “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabathani.*” And then verse 6, “I am a worm and not a man.” Here is Jesus, nailed to the tree, His body bent and twisted. Here is Jesus, a bloody horrific mess. Here is Jesus, mocked, ridiculed, and abandoned. God has a word for that: worm.

He did it all for you. And so God’s transforming word to us is exactly this. Isaiah 41:15, “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. And you shall rejoice in the LORD; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory” (Isaiah 41:16).

Worms become mountain movers! The lowly and despised are loved and lifted up. 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. God has a word for that. Grace! Amen.