

Rev. Dan Welch Wed. in Lent 2 3-11-20 Text: Isaiah 44:1-5

A few years ago, I remember picking out a Confirmation Bible verse for a confirmand. It was 2 Peter 3:18, "But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ." About five years after that, this former student of mine showed me her new tattoo she had on her ankle of a plant. She explained that it was based on her Confirmation verse and throughout her life she would add to the plant to make it bigger. My reply was: "I'm sure glad I didn't choose John 11:35 as your confirmation verse- 'Jesus wept', because then you probably would have gotten a tear drop tattooed on your face!"

Anyway, this story reminds me of a story I recently read about a woman named Shelly Jackson, who not only is an author, she's a walking piece of literature. She has a tattoo on her right wrist that reads, "S-k-i-n". That's right, *Skin*. It's actually the title of Jackson's latest project, which she calls "A Mortal Work of Art." The plan is that her 2095-word story would be published exclusively in tattoos, one word at a time, on the skin of volunteers. Once a volunteer is accepted into the project, they are known only by the word they bear on their skin.

"It's not that everything I do has to be tricked out with gimmicks and games," Jackson said. "I'm just interested in exploring the range of what a text can do." At last count, Shelley Jackson was still looking for people to bear her final three hundred words. Just think, we could contact her after church, offer her the skin on our wrists, and be part of a counter-cultural narrative! How many are ready to line up to be inked with a one-word tattoo? That's just what I thought. And, truth be told I'm not all that eager get a tattoo either.

The prophet Isaiah also wants people to be marked with one word and be part of a counter-cultural narrative. He writes in our text, "This one will write upon his hand 'Belonging to the LORD.'"

One of the ancient Near East's most dominant narratives in the sixth century BC was the Babylonian creation epic called the *Enuma Elish*. The *Enuma Elish* narrates Marduk's defeat over Tiamat. He cut her in two and built the universe out of her remains. Read during the annual Akitu festival, the feast reached its pinnacle with the acclamation: "Marduk is King"!

Connected to the pomp and pageantry of Babylonian religion was the empire's program of changing people's names. Just ask Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. Or maybe you know them by their VeggieTale names, Shach, Rach, and Benny. Some affectionately call them, "Your Shack, My Shack, and a Bungalow." But in Daniel 1:7 the chief of the eunuchs changes their names to

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The goal? Mark the Judeans with a new name that will entice them into worshipping Marduk.

But Judean exiles in Babylon didn't line up. They weren't interested in being marked by their Maker. Because, you see, there was another text in town. "There's no place like home" was being replaced with "There's no place like Babylon." Oh my! God's call upon His people here is this: When in Babylon, don't live like the Babylonians.

The dominant story of our day is peddled by the young and the beautiful who guarantee we can be young and beautiful, just like them, if we buy things we don't need, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't even like. Their story is hammered into our heads at an alarming rate. On a typical day in America, from the time we wake up until the time we go to bed, we will encounter more than two thousand advertising images. And these images portray over and over again the dominant American narrative "You can buy lasting happiness!"

In league with the pomp and pageantry of American consumerism is the enemy's program of changing our names. His goal? Mark us with a new name that will entice us into seeking ultimate fulfillment in things. Deemed beloved through water and the Word, Satan renames us cheap, dirty, and worthless. Deemed washed and cleansed in the name of Jesus, he whispers to us, "Guilty as charged." Designated as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God," the liar brazenly boasts, "It's all fiction, it's all fantasy, it's all a figment of your imagination."

Enter Isaiah 40-55, where the prophet takes dead aim at the empire. Babylon is a drop in the bucket (40:12). Babylonian leaders are nothing (40:23). Babylonian gods are an empty wind (41:29). Marduk is a fantasy, a fake, a fraud, and a huge phony.

And the alternative narrative in Isaiah 40-55 is just getting revved up! "Comfort, comfort My people, says your God" (40:1). "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, God is doing a new thing" (43:18-19). God is stirring the Persian King Cyrus to get Israel out of Babylon and He is raising up the Suffering Servant to get Babylon out of Israel. The whole program is summarized in 52:7: "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.'" And, taking another shot against Babylon and every other seductive and satanic story, the Lord maintains that His story lasts forever (40:8). The Lord promises that His story

does what it says. Isaiah 55:11, “So shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty.” We are the subject of God’s story, so much so that we line up, each one, and “write upon our hand” not “belonging to Babylon,” but “belonging to Yahweh.”

Our God has always told His story on people’s bodies; call it *Skin*! In Genesis 4:15, the Lord marks Cain. In Genesis 17, the Lord gives Abraham and his offspring the covenant mark of circumcision. Deuteronomy 6:8 describes people tying God’s words on their hands and binding them on their foreheads. In his vision, the prophet Ezekiel sees the Lord command a man to use a writing kit to put His mark on the foreheads of the faithful.

And it all points to the most awesome story ever told on human skin. Isaiah describes this body, 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. . . . We all, like sheep, have gone astray. And the LORD has laid upon Him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 52:14; 53:3, 6). And then these words from the Suffering Servant: “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” (Isaiah 50:60). One spear, three nails, and a crown of thorns left their marks on Jesus.

But first the Ten, and then climactically Thomas, saw Jesus alive; and what shall we call that story? Call it *Skin*. Our Savior showed His skin. He is forever marked with scars announcing for you, right here, right now, His loyal love and His free forgiveness and His everlasting grace! And so people began lining up to be marked.

Paul puts it this way in Galatians 6:17: “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” Eyes marked with tenderness and kindness; a smile marked with delight and friendship; a mind marked with toughness and truth; hands marked with helpfulness and humility; and a mouth marked with Jesus and joy.

To be a part of this counter-cultural narrative, all we need to take on is one word: *leyahweh*—in English, “belonging to the Lord.” But just how does that happen? Recall the water, remember the Word, and forever cherish this liturgical rite when you were baptized. “Receive the sign of the holy cross, both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified.”

Just because we live in Babylon does not mean we will live like the Babylonians. My life and your life tell another story. We are consumed with another narrative. And what is that called? Jesus . . . with skin. Amen.