

Freed from Fear
Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Trinity
Sermon Text: Isaiah 43:1-7



But now thus says the Lord, He who created you, O Jacob, He who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for My glory, whom I formed and made."

Maria sat in her little house and trembled in fear. The last of her savings lay strewn all about as she feverishly tied a bag shut. She had just seen pictures by a certain Johann Tetzel – pictures of hell. These terrifying depictions had burned themselves deep in her mind and ever since then, she could hardly sleep. Maria was desperate. She firmly believed that she would go to hell, so she really had to redeem her soul with the money she had saved, just as Tetzel had promised. With trembling hands, she counted the money that she had arduously saved away over the years. It wasn't much, just enough to alleviate her worst worries. Maria knew that she had to give away her money. And she also knew that it wouldn't be enough. She would have to do it all again, she would once again skimp on bread for her children, once again save away money in the little bag, once again go to church. Maria was driven by fear!

Against all this fear, God sets a single item, expressed in Hebrew with the word "Ve Atah." The meaning of "Ve Atah" is something like an absolute counterbalance and wants to express: **against all the** fear, **against all the** terrible things that exist in the world – there is only one word and that is the word that God speaks which is something like "nevertheless" or "in spite of." God wants to say: even though there is fear and even though there are many things that scare us, **nevertheless**, I have the last word. God has the final say against fear and He says: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you!" Isaiah proclaims this word back then and it applies to us today. Dear congregation, how desperately we also need these words of hope, freedom, and salvation from fear in our time. In the time of Martin Luther, it was the Roman Catholic church that caused fear through images of hell. Today, it is no longer the church that talks about the end of the world. Today, the end of the world is brought before us in concrete and practical experiences. I see that a lot of people are afraid. Many young people spent crucial years of their lives in solitude because of an uncontrollable and unknown pandemic. No sooner had they survived that than we were all taken by surprise by the war in Ukraine. And because of the climate crisis, people are afraid of the future. That our world is extremely endangered is beyond a doubt. And there is no question that, as Christians, we are also called to carefully and responsibly care for the creation which God has given us. It is our duty to care for creation.

It is also our duty to care for the spiritual and physical wellbeing of people and animals. However, it is not our duty to save the world. That's really not our job, it belongs firmly in the hands of our living God who made us. And especially in this time, we as Christians, should share our faith in God who governs heaven and earth with our fellow human beings. We need this great Hebrew word again: "Ve Atah" – "nevertheless!" We need words of life that see salvation even when there is only decay everywhere. And here, God speaks His sublime word "Ve Atah" – "but now." One can also say: nevertheless or despite all the fear: "Fear not!" The first time Isaiah uttered these

words, he addressed the people of Israel. At that time, the Israelites were also threatened by fear. The immediate fear was the Babylonian world power. With the sentence, "Fear not," Isaiah makes us look beyond the immediate dangers. We should see God's greater plan which is far more than what now burdens us. When Isaiah finds such comforting words, he does so because he is looking directly into the Father's heart. What does Isaiah find in the heart of our God? He finds you and me there. Yes, you and I, standing here together today, we are embedded in His heart. We have been in the Father's heart long before creation. We will remain fixed in the Father's heart even when our bodies have decayed and we are no longer here. We always remain safe within the heart of our God. Every infant that comes into the world is an act of God's love. Each person is not a product of pure chance but a result of God's action and a result of His love for us. That is a powerful remedy against fear! When God spoke to Israel through Isaiah, He simply listed the things that He had already done for His people: He led them out of Egypt; being rescued from many enemies should serve as proof that God considers you precious. The people of Israel were led into slavery because they had sinned. Because of this sin, they are separated from God. We are still experiencing this condition today. The many unknown and known troubles all stem from one root which is that we are separated from God by our sin. Even now, we see that people live in deep torment because of this. Why? Because they feel separated from God. The popular singer, Stephan Sulke, sings this for example: "Dear Lord, why don't You come down and look at the burdens here!" Perhaps it makes sense for all of us to go home today and make a list on which we write down all our personal experiences of God's salvation and protection. Perhaps we can also write on this list our many wanted and unwanted mistakes. But on this list, the outcome is crucial which is this: God loves me. He loves me even when and especially when I am not good and when I am afraid and when I feel separated from Him. God's love isn't only for us with the implication that we have the smoothest and most successful life possible here on earth. No, God's love applies above all when He makes us new through baptism. Since our baptism, we are a new creation. The old is gone and our life since our baptism is hidden in Christ, in God. I know that life in this world goes deep into the soul. The life that we live here between zero and about 70 lasts forever in our minds and we do everything we can so that we can live sheltered here and now during this time. But God wants to direct our sight further. We should look to what God has in store for us far above the experiences of here and now. In the story I told at the beginning about Maria in the time of Martin Luther, I tried to imagine her fear. The same fear rules even now. One young man says: "I'd like to turn off my fears and burdens like I can turn off my TV!" How can we be freed from fear? Maria from the story, was freed by the Gospel. She realized that she doesn't have to redeem herself because God has already redeemed her. That is the exact wording Isaiah uses – God Himself paid the ransom. Now the expensive Gospel is this: God has paid and nothing, but this same Gospel, will free us today of fear. We can't save the world... but God can save us! Through Christ, God made a radical break with fear. He removed fear through His resurrection. He eliminated fear by promising us eternal life. Isaiah could see this glimpse into the distant future and this glimpse also set him free in his own crazy world. The poet, Marie Schmalenbach, summarizes all of this in the words of her song, "Brich herein süßer Schein" (Break in sweet light): "Eternity, shine brightly into time, that the small will appear great and great appear small for us, blessed eternity." Amen.