

- 14 Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob,
O little Israel,
for I myself will help you,” declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*
- 15 “See, I will make 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.*
- 16 You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.
But you will rejoice in the LORD
and glory in the Holy One of Israel. (NIV84)*
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LISTEN UP, YOU WORMS!!

There’s lots of animal imagery in the Bible! Many times God uses an animal picture to tell a story or to make a point. He promises his people through Isaiah that they will soar like an eagle. Amos uses the lion to picture strength and beauty. Maybe the best picture of all is Jesus who became the Lamb of God to be our perfect and sinless sacrifice.

God uses a vivid animal picture in our text for today and it made its way into our theme! **Listen Up Your Worms!!**

It’s not the most memorable animal picture or the most comforting, but it is an accurate one. This morning we’ll see why God used it, how it fits, and how it really can even be a comfort to us!!

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons and services that will take us right through Lent into Holy Week. The series is called Singing with the Exiles and is based on lessons from the book of Isaiah. I think a little review of the material and historical background will help your understanding and make these weeks more beneficial for you.

Isaiah was God’s prophet over the nation of Judah. He was the prophet after the northern tribes were carried off by Assyria, but before the Babylonians conquered the temple and carried off the southern kingdom in 586 BC. Isaiah lived before that time but much of his writing pointed forward to those days and beyond. That period in the history of God’s people is often called the Babylonian Captivity so the series theme Singing with the Exiles is referring to those people, those captives, those people who were taken from their homes and who were carried off to a strange and foreign land.

God used the Babylonians to carry out his will against the people. They had turned their backs on God and on his Word, and so God was going to teach them just how much he was in charge. The threats that were made came true and the results of their sin and unbelief was that they would lose their temple and the homes and their Promised Land.

A refugee story is always a sad story. When people are forced to leave their homeland, it’s sad, but remember that for the Israelites, that land was a promise that God had made. If you stay faithful to

Isaiah 41:14-16

me, you'll possess this land forever. Losing that land was a constant reminder that they had broken the covenant that they had with God.

But yet through Isaiah there was singing! Though he foretold the loss of their land and their national identity, yet Isaiah proclaimed something greater than their sin – God's forgiveness. He encouraged them about the remnant that would return, the group that would come back from Babylon to Jerusalem and Israel. Isaiah proclaimed restoration, reconciliation, peace for God's people. He told them of a God of love, that the God who had forgiven the sins of their fathers would forgive all who turn to him for mercy. So even in Exile, they could sing! Even as captives, they could rejoice.

Have you ever noticed that if a person wants to repeat something that is less than charitable they will always quote the person? If the news report is going to report something offensive that a person says, they put it in quotes as a way to pass along the news and dodge the blame. That way no one is confused about what is the anchor's or the network's spin and what is the persons actual words.

That's kind of what Isaiah is doing here as we begin our text today. He's the one who wrote the verse 41. He's the one who penned the word "worm" to describe Israel. But that's not Isaiah's description, its God's. At the end of that phrase it says *declares the Lord*. "Don't shoot the messenger, Isaiah could have said – just passing along what I was told."

If you could be any animal, what would you choose? Maybe a big powerful beautiful lion. Maybe a super-fast cheetah, Maybe a soaring eagle. Who would choose a worm?? What is it about no legs, no arms, no eyes, slimy, lives in the mud that isn't admirable for you?

No one wants to be a worm.

But that's what God calls his people. Like the drill sergeant: **Listen up, you worms!** Fitting that illustration even better – the Hebrew word used there could also be maggots! Listen up you Maggots!!

When a drill sergeant screams those words at a group of new recruits, is he trying to make them feel warm and fuzzy? Is he trying to build a rapport with them? Is he trying to make friends? Nope! He's trying to remind them that they are at the bottom and that he is their superior. He is in charge.

And it's a fitting description, right? They were the ones that were getting pressed in on every side by a growing number of enemies. They were the ones that were trying to live without God and were failing miserably in the process. They were the ones that were small and insignificant and lowly, yet they didn't always remember it! God is always right so this should come as no surprise, but the Israelites were worms.

And the description fits us too. God rightly speaks to us **Listen Up, You Worms!!** We are lowly and insignificant compared to God. But too often we forget that it's true when we try making our own rules or questioning God's guidance in our lives. We are the ones that get puffed up with pride instead of humbly serving others in love. We are the ones that look down on others as if we are better than others. We are the ones that deserve to wallow in the mud of our messed up lives. We deserve to get

Isaiah 41:14-16

smushed on the sidewalk by a toddler. We deserve to get baked on the parking lot on a sunny day. We deserve the fires of wrath and the pains of hell – worms that we are.

Listen up You Worms!! That's who you are, that's what you and I deserve. But listen up!!

*Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob,
O little Israel,
for I myself will help you," declares the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.*

God doesn't call us a worm to put us in our place, but to show us the love that he had for us. We are insignificant, helpless on our own, but God helped us. He himself helped us, becoming our Holy One, our Redeemer.

A redeemer is one who buys back. He's a close blood relative who pays a price to cancel your debt, buy back your land secure your inheritance. Jesus is our Redeemer. He's our blood relative who paid a price – his blood – to buy us back. He pays our debt, restores us from captivity to sin and gives us an inheritance, a place in the Promised Land of heaven.

He paid that debt by giving his life. He offered himself as the sacrifice for your sins and mine on the cross. He did it by putting himself in our place and taking the pain and punishment we deserve. Psalm 22 is a Messianic Psalm – one that is fulfilled directly in Jesus the Messiah. It's from Psalm 22 that one of his 7 words from the cross comes. *My God, My God, Why have you forsaken me?* Words of love, words of agony. Words that he would rather speak than have to hear you speak. He loved you enough to be forsaken by God, to be treated as insignificant and worthless in God's eyes. Should have been us, but Jesus took our place!! You find something interesting as you keep reading Psalm 22. There's only 2 places in the whole Bible where the term worm is used to talk about a person or people. One is our text from Isaiah where God fairly and justly calls us worms. The other is Psalm 22 (verses 6-7) – the one who took our place describes himself that way:

*But I am a worm and not a man,
scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me;
they hurl insults, shaking their heads:*

Though he lived a perfect and spotless life, Jesus died a worm's death. He became a worm for us. He was willing to have his body twisted and bent and nailed to a tree. Mired and plagued by the dirt of sin, he paid sin's price. And then when the payment was made, he took his place in the ground with the worms – the grave - the place of sinners.

But that's not where he stayed. Like a worm that surfaces after a rain, Jesus rose up from the ground to announce victory, and to show his followers that their sins had been forgiven. *Peace* was his greeting when he appeared to his disciples and it's what we have knowing that he is risen.

A few weeks ago, we talked about the threshing of grain and how it worked. We talked about how we deserve to be blown away like the chaff, the waste. Look at how God flips the script on that picture here.

*See, I will make 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.
¹⁶ You will winnow them, the wind will pick them up,
and a gale will blow them away.*

We are the ones doing the threshing. And our enemies are the ones being threshed. The obstacles in this world are the ones that are being crushed and removed from our path. In victory in battle, those threshing sleds would be used to trample the enemy and destroy the arms that were used by the enemy. God shows us victory in Jesus and makes us the ones that thwart his power. With proclamation of his Word we thresh over his lies and schemes. With Christ's Holy Supper, we can silence his accusations and a conscience that is plagued by guilt. With a remembrance of our baptisms, we are reminded that we've been adopted to the winning side – the family of God.

What a turn around that is!! From worms, insignificant, to those for whom our Savior died. From maggots, to a treasured possession, one worth giving your life for, one worth God himself giving his life for. You have value in God's eyes, because of the perfection that was won for you in Jesus.

So live in that obedience. Cherish the new creation that you are, the new identity that God's given you. Find value, not in stuff but in him. Use that which he has given you and that which you are to worship him. Celebrate the transforming love that he shines in your life and seek to shine it into the lives of those around you. Then they might join you in worship thanksgiving praise of the one who became a worm to change our worm-like lives forever.

With this news in your mind and with this joy in your heart, you can Sing with the Exiles. Like they, you've been set free washed cleaned, restored and promised and awesome future. With all this in mind, Isaiah's closing words can be our comfort, or goal, or life. God grant it for all of us, all our days:

But you will rejoice in the LORD and glory in the Holy One of Israel. Amen.