

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Yahweh is committed to you.

But now this is what the LORD says, the LORD who created you, O Jacob, the LORD who formed you, O Israel. Do not be afraid, because I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. ² When you cross through the waters, I will be with you. When you cross the rivers, they will not sweep you away. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned, and the flame will not set you on fire. ³ Because I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior, I gave Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious and honored in my eyes, and I myself love you, I will give people in exchange for you, and peoples in exchange for your life. ⁵ Do not be afraid, because I am with you. From the east I will bring your offspring, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, "Give them back!" and to the south, "Do not hold them." Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, everyone I created for my glory, everyone I formed, yes, everyone I have made.

—Isaiah 43:1-7

I was sitting in Panera Bread this week working on my sermon, and I overheard two SuperStar Car Wash managers talking about their employees. Based on their conversation, I assume that they were preparing for their employee evaluations. One evaluation stood out to me. They said something to the effect, "He started with great potential, but he doesn't show up to work on time. When he does show up, he works with half-heartedness. He is just not committed to the job." Any guesses what might happen to him?

Commitment is important in our lives, isn't it? Every employer understands the importance of commitment from their employees. Every coach instills commitment from their players. We know the significance of commitment in marriage. I mean, that's the essence of marriage, isn't it? When a man and a woman enter marriage, they are signifying that they will be committed to each other as husband and wife for life. Commitment is so important in every facet of our lives.

We also know that to be true with our relationship with God. In about two months from now, we will have seventeen young people stand before God and this congregation. They will make their promises that they will be committed to the Lord and his Word for their entire lives. They would rather face death than to turn away from the Lord. Commitments are huge.

But I don't have to prove to you how often people break their commitments. Employers need to fire employees at times because of broken commitments. They just don't do the work. Athletes are kicked off the team because they are not committed to the team and the work. And according to a law firm's website, the number one reason why people divorce in America is "lack of commitment." They are not committed to working on their marriage.

And I'm sure your hearts are just as concerned as my heart is when we look at the commitments of young confirmation students. In our own church body as the WELS, four out of every ten confirmands stop attending church within two years after they have been confirmed. 40% of those individuals who make their promises of commitment break that commitment within two years of being confirmed.

So, it's worth thinking about commitment today. We are in a series for worship entitled "Rethinking religion." Today we are rethinking commitment. I would like you to reflect on something in your own life. How committed are you in following Jesus? Don't answer that question out loud. But as you reflect on that question, think about your past week. In everything you did this week, did you do it all to the glory of God? No selfish motives. No interest for self. Purely and always for God's glory.

Think about your relationships with people. In everything you did this week, did you always do things out of sacrificial love for others? Did you clean your room purely out of love for your parents? Did you take out the trash without grumbling and complaining because it helps your family? Did you protect the reputation of your co-worker at work? Was everything you did for the best interest of someone else?

I won't assume anything about you, but I look at my life and I can see times when I am weak at keeping commitments. Every single time I sin, I have broken my commitment to follow and reflect Jesus. You and I gather here every week to confess our sins. And I don't know how it is for you, but when I pause for personal reflection time, the sins that flood my thoughts are my failures in being committed to God and his Word for my life.

As a Christian I want to know how I can be more committed to following God. How can I be more committed to my marriage and my relationships? How can I be more committed to serving others? How can I be more committed to being a better Christian?

Well, to help us with that, I want to direct your attention to the prophet Isaiah. About 2700 years ago, Isaiah looked out at God's people, and he saw a lot of people who were not committed to following God. He could look to the north and see Israel taken away, and he saw that the same was about to happen to Judah in the south.

And if you read Isaiah 42, the chapter before our text for today, you can see some of the strong judgment that the Lord was going to bring against his people. At the end of Isaiah 42, Isaiah writes, **“Who gave up Jacob to looters and Israel to plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we sinned? But they were not willing to walk in his ways, and they did not listen to his law.”** In other words, God's people were not committed to following him. And then Isaiah talks about what God does to people who are not committed to following him. **“So he poured out wrath on them, his anger, and the violence of battle. It set them on fire all around, but they did not understand. It burned in them, but they did not take it to heart.”** God's Old Testament people would see that judgment against them. In a little more than 100 years, the Babylonians were coming. And they would destroy the temple, the people, the city. God the Holy Spirit led Isaiah to see all of this clearly.

But when he wrote the words of his prophecy, Isaiah saw more than Jews living in exile and the destruction of Jerusalem. His vision went farther than that, and it was wider than that. In his near-sighted vision he saw the hopelessness of Jewish exiles in Babylon. But in his far-sighted vision he saw the desperation of millions of exiles all over the world. And you and I were among those exiles.

The Jews were living in a state of war, but so were we, and our situation was a whole lot worse. The Jews were at war with Babylon, but we were at war with God, who was furious because of our sins.

The news about Jerusalem was bad, but the news about sin was worse. Captivity in Babylon wasn't exactly a piece of cake, but that captivity was glorious compared to the captivity that we were in because of sin.

It may have seemed to the people of Judah that God had forsaken them, but God really had forsaken us. That's what God's judgment is all about, you know. He is so disgusted with sin that he's ready to give us up and leave us for dead.

What Isaiah saw happening to the people of Judah is ancient history. But what Isaiah saw happening to people is still happening today. It's part of my life, and it's part of yours. The real warfare that sin causes, the hellish captivity that sin deserves, and the divine anger that sin arouses are just as real today as they were 2700 years ago. And so is our helplessness and the hopelessness. Once you're into sin – and we're all into sin – once you're into sin, you can't get out of sin.

As much as we would love to think that if we just commit ourselves a little more to God then he will look more favorably on us, it doesn't work that way. As much as we are committed to the Lord, our commitment is not enough. I look back on just this past week, and I can see failure after failure. If God were going to conduct an evaluation on my performance as his follower, I would be fired.

But here's the amazing thing about Isaiah 43. You turn over the page from Isaiah 42 and you see the word, “But.” **“But now this is what the LORD says.”** And I want to pause there a bit. I would like to highlight God's name with you.

You see his name frequently throughout the Old Testament Scriptures. 700 years before Isaiah wrote, God revealed his name to Moses. God was calling Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. They were held as slaves in Egypt. Well, Moses stood before a burning bush that wasn't burning up. And Moses actually asked a good question. “If I go to the people of Israel and they ask, ‘Who is sending you? What is his name,’ what should I tell them?” That's a good question.

Do you remember how God answered Moses? **“God replied to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He also said, ‘You will say this to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.’ God also told Moses, ‘Say this to the Israelites: “The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation”’”** (Exodus 3).

This is such an amazing part of Scripture, I can hardly contain myself. This is a portion of God's Word where you and I really ought to take off our shoes because where we are standing is holy ground. I put an insert in your service folder. On the top, it looks like some chicken scratching. I don't want you to think that I'm getting all weird or something. But I think it's good for us to just ponder who God is. This this is how God reveals himself to us.

In many of your translations, you come across the word “LORD” in small capital letters. That's how the EHV translates this word: LORD. The Jews considered this name so holy, that they never pronounced it. Instead, they would pronounce, “Adonai” or “Lord” whenever they came across that name in Scripture.

This four letter Hebrew word (Yod, Hey, Vav, Hey) corresponds to the characters “Yahweh.” The Jewish tradition did not want to say “Yahweh” for fear that the name would be blasphemed. It's not true, but that is what was taught. But look at how God describes himself before Moses. **“This is my name forever, and this is how I am to be remembered from generation to generation.”** Across all time and all space, this is how God wants to be known.

He is "I am." What a great name for the Lord! With this name, God reveals that he is a personal being (not some force or magical power out there); he's absolutely independent (not bound by anything); he's timeless; he's constant; he's unchangeable. Oh, we could spend a lot more time discussing the nuances of God's name, but for now I just want you to contemplate Yahweh's commitment to you.

Ever since Adam and Eve gave into Satan's lies and sinned, Yahweh has been committed to saving the people of this world. And Isaiah starts chapter 43 by writing, "**But now this is what the LORD says.**" This is Yahweh. This is God who is absolutely independent. He does his own thing, not dependent on anybody else.

This is Yahweh, who promised to send a Savior to crush Satan's head. This is Yahweh, who made a promise to Abraham that all people would be blessed through his descendants. This is Yahweh, who always keeps his promises. This is Yahweh, who created and formed his people. This is Yahweh who says, "**Do not be afraid, because I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. When you cross through the waters, I will be with you. When you cross the rivers, they will not sweep you away. When you walk through fire, you will not be burned, and the flame will not set you on fire. Because I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior, I gave Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you.**" Yahweh is committed to saving his people.

This is Yahweh. The same LORD who brought them out of Egypt would be with them through every danger they face, even in captivity in Babylon. He would be the one who would rescue them when they would be thrown into the fiery furnace or thrown into the lions' den. He would rescue his people and protect them and bring them back.

Yahweh continues, "**Because you are precious and honored in my eyes, and I myself love you, I will give people in exchange for you, and peoples in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, because I am with you. From the east I will bring your offspring, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, "Give them back!" and to the south, "Do not hold them." Bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, everyone I created for my glory, everyone I formed, yes, everyone I have made.**"

All of a sudden we see a bigger picture. God isn't just talking about the people of Israel. He's talking about people coming from all over. Just look at how committed Yahweh is to you. He doesn't change. He has been and always will be faithful to his promises.

At just the right time Yahweh entered into our world and took on flesh. The people of this world were held as prisoners, locked up and chained up in sin. That's where you and I were. We were bound in shackles, destined to be held as slaves forever.

But Yahweh came into our world to set us free. His name is Jesus. His name is Savior. Oh, how easily could it have been for Jesus to call on the angels to set him free from the weak hands of human beings who ridiculed and mocked him! But he didn't. How easily could it have been for Yahweh to simply say "Stop," and all the soldiers would have fallen over dead. But he didn't. How easily could the Creator of wood and iron simply walked away from that wooden cross and iron nails!

But he didn't! Because he was so committed to you! He is committed to your salvation. He is committed to your rescue. He is committed to your redemption.

And it doesn't stop there. Yahweh writes his name on you. He claims you as his own. You are his precious child. He wrote his name on you in the waters of baptism, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. And as often as you and I have failed in our commitments to follow Jesus, he always there ready and willing to forgive and welcome you back into his arms.

He's Yahweh. He's the LORD. His love for you is not dependent on how much you love him. His faithfulness to you is not dependent on how faithful you are to him. And his commitment to you is not dependent on how committed you are to him. Just marvel at that truth about your God.

Because that truth empowers my commitment to him. When I focus on Yahweh, on Jesus, who is so committed to me and my salvation and my redemption and my life, then I am committed to being what God has made me to be.

So let's go back to the original questions. How can I be more committed to following God? How can I be more committed to my marriage and my relationships? How can I be more committed to serving others? How can I be more committed to being a better Christian? The answer? Focus on this truth: Yahweh is committed to you. Amen.