

“The Pearls of Life: You Are Not Alone”
Isaiah 41:8-10

As a child, I was so fascinated by the idea that we are not alone in the universe and that there are other beings out there. One of the best movies to portray this idea is ET which was about a young boy’s friendship with an alien botanist who was left behind when his group had to leave earth rather quickly. Here is a scene of their first encounter:

<https://youtu.be/8oQcSsfrUz0>

One of the things I love about this movie is the deep connection between Elliot and ET. Despite the language and culture barriers, they have a deep connection that defies the normal ways of communication. One of the reasons this movie was such a success is that it spoke to something deep within us as human beings. We are born to connect. We are created to connect with others and with God. Yet, life’s struggles, disappointments, fears, failures, and even hopes and ambitions often make us feel alone and cut off from others and from God. Some of us may feel isolated by thinking that there is no such thing as God because our ideas and images of God may be too scary and negative. Some of us may feel alone because of our internal or external circumstances when life is a struggle. And this feeling of being separated and alone is growing among us because of the modern ways of life where many people live on their own or away from family. In January of this year, the British government appointed a minister for loneliness. According to a New York Times’ article, “At the end of last year, a government commission issued the findings of a twelve-month investigation into the prevalence of loneliness in the U.K., conducted with the help of more than a dozen nonprofit organizations. According to the report, nine million Britons suffer from loneliness: fourteen per cent of the population. Among vulnerable cohorts, the rates are much higher. In a survey of the well-being of disabled Britons, half reported feelings of loneliness at least once a day. More than a third of elderly people reported being overwhelmed by loneliness. (This scourge is not limited to Britain: in Japan, elder loneliness is a recognized phenomenon.) The chief officer of Age UK, Mark Robinson, warned that social isolation could be worse for a person’s health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.”

It is such a common human experience to feel separate and alone, especially from God. That is why today we begin this sermon series about the Pearls of Life which are basically prayer beads that help remind us of our connection to God, to others, and to ourselves. They are based on a prayer way developed by a Lutheran bishop in Sweden. I invite you today to take a strand of these beads to begin our summer journey of prayer together. The idea behind these beads is simple, yet powerful. In their book *Pearls of Life*, Martin Lonnebo, Carolina Welin, and Carolina Johansson write that “Our inner voice grows weak and our spirit becomes constricted. We live disjointed lives, continually distracted by interruptions throughout the course of the day...We become restless and discontented with our own lives, feeling we are existing, but not living. Even our feelings lack life. Our enthusiasm wanes, and our energy for life fizzles. We need help...How do you find balance in your own life? That’s easier said than done when you

don't have adequate time. On the positive side, it doesn't require a lot of time - just a few minutes each day can go a long way. It's important to show yourself respect and love - to calm your mind and become introspective. The *Pearls of life* are spiritual companions that help you see beyond our shallow vision of what truly matters in life."

And so today we begin with the God Pearl because it reminds us that we are not alone. This is the big silver pearl on the strand of beads. And as we focus today on this pearl, I invite us to visit the story of the people of Israel in Exile as they felt alone and isolated from God and from the goodness of life. The Exile was a traumatizing experience for them on many levels. We can only imagine their pain after losing their homeland to the Babylonians who conquered them. They had lost their sense of wholeness and felt cut off from God. In the ancient world, people believed that when a nation conquered another, that would be evidence that their gods were stronger and better than the gods of the ones conquered. The verses from Isaiah 41:8-10 were spoken to a people who felt deeply discouraged and alone. The first 39 chapters in Isaiah had a lot of mourning and admonitions to the people. But starting with chapter 40, we hear a different voice for a different time. The people had lost hope and had no vision of returning to their land, but here was the prophet reminding them that not all was lost because God was with them. They felt lost and abandoned by God. But Isaiah had an incredible message of hope for them. This hope was not based on just things and circumstances getting better, it was also about how their deep sense of being and life was going to be transformed. No longer were they to live as people who forget that God is with them even when all evidence around them and inside of them may be saying otherwise. They were to live each day knowing that God is a constant presence and energy in their lives and that would make all the difference for their lives and for their future as a people. So, today as we begin this journey of prayer for the summer, I invite you to take a few moments to ponder the mystery of the presence of God in your life and in our world. You might be feeling really connected to life, to others, and to God at this point or you might be in a tough or questioning spot in your life. No matter where you are, I invite you to reflect on what it means for you to affirm with the prophet Isaiah that you are never alone. Remember that "nothing is hopeless or meaningless when you find God." If you are comfortable with it, turn to your neighbor and discuss the following three questions:

What does the presence of God look or feel like in your life right now?

What helps you pay attention?

How might the God Pearl be of help to you at this time?

There is an incredible gift of power and hope in knowing that we don't walk alone in this life. I love that one of the titles for Jesus at his birth is "Immanuel" which literally means, "God with Us." What a strong reminder that we are not alone. That is what the fans of Liverpool soccer have proclaimed in their support of their team. 50,000 fans rise each game and sing together this song to encourage each other. As we watch a couple of clips of that song, I invite you to consider that feeling and how that message of encouragement is needed in our world. Who needs encouragement in your life that they

are not walking alone? Who reminds you that you are not alone and that we are all together in this?

The song "You'll Never Walk Alone"

<https://youtu.be/Go-jJlGd1so>

https://youtu.be/OV5_LQArLa0

(For second service)

William Frey tells a story from his youth about volunteering to read to a student named John who could not see. One day, Frey asked, "How did you lose your sight?" "A chemical explosion," John said, "at the age of thirteen." "How did that make you feel?" "Life was over. I felt helpless. I hated God." John went on to say, "For the first six months, I did nothing to improve my lot in life. I ate all my meals alone in my room. One day my father came to my room and said, 'John, winter's coming and the storm windows need to be up - that's your job. I want those hung by the time I get back this evening or else!' "Then he turned, walked out of the room, and slammed the door. I got so angry. I thought, 'Who does he think I am? I'm blind!' I was so angry I decided to do it. I felt my way to the garage, found the windows, located the necessary tools, found the ladder, all the while muttering under my breath, 'I'll show them. I'll fall, then they'll have a blind and paralyzed son!'" John continued, "I got the windows up. I found out later that never at any moment was my father more than five feet away from my side."

May the words of the prophet Isaiah always inspire to know deep in our hearts that we are never alone or abandoned. Remember that God says: "do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God." Amen.