

Sermon for the First Sunday after the Epiphany
January 9, 2022 Yr C
St. Michael's Episcopal Church
The Reverend Canon Michael J. Horvath
Isaiah 43:1-7

As part of my seminary education, I had to take what is called CPE or Clinical Pastoral Education during the summer of our first year of seminary. It was a hospital-based practicum, and I was assigned as the chaplain in the Intensive Care Unit at Mount Sinai Hospital in the Upper East Side of NYC. One of my patients was a man who was in the last stages of pancreatic cancer. He was a lifelong Episcopalian, so, whenever I visited, he knew exactly which prayers he wanted to pray from the Prayer Book, and which Psalms he wanted to read. He seemed ready for anything, including what was to come. I learned a lot about his life in our half hour meetings during those weeks.

As his life neared its end, our conversations took a more somber tone, and his fear of death was strong. This man, a powerful executive in the world's largest investment bank, was scared. This man, who took up skydiving in his 50's and who had hiked the Appalachian trail from Georgia to Maine, three times, was scared. None of our prayers seemed to bring him comfort or ease of mind, but still we sat and grieved together. He seemed to believe that God had somehow abandoned him in this painful state of suffering.

That's when today's passage from Isaiah come to mind.

***Thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.***

With that opening, I read Isaiah passage to him as if praying, perhaps praying words that this man needed to hear. He died a few hours later, and ever since then, this passage has been carved deep in my heart. It is the one passage I want read to me on my deathbed, God willing. Because it is the ultimate love letter of One who is loving, and faithful and merciful, especially at the end of our time in this world.

Fear grabs us. Worry holds us. We find ourselves wracked by fear for any number of reasons. Fear exhausts our energy and makes us weak. Fear makes us forget who we are in God's eyes.

But God says, "Do not fear."

Israel was bound up by fear, you see, because at this point in the Book of Isaiah, they had been held in captivity in Babylon for 70 years because of their lack of faith. They had repeatedly

disobeyed God. Beginning in the wilderness with Moses, the people of Israel complained against God, doubted his goodness, and turned to idols. This continued in the days of judges and the kings.

God sent prophets to warn them, but they refused to listen.

Finally, God had had enough and sends them into exile.

Now the Israelites are afraid of the future. God had promised that their exile would last only seventy years, but would he keep his promise? They had sinned against God and deserved his anger. Would God still be faithful to his Word? Could God ever forgive them? Would God ever forgive them? Would they ever see Jerusalem again?

Like Israel, we are in the habit of turning away from God in so many ways. So many times. We are as guilty as Israel.

It's no wonder that we are often afraid of death, perhaps fearful of how we will stand up before our God on Judgement Day. Could God ever forgive us? Would God ever forgive us? We fear and then we worry.

We don't trust God to take care of us, so we worry about tomorrow. We don't have confidence in God, so we get filled with anxiety. We start beating up on ourselves and then on one another.

"Thus says the Lord." With those words, Isaiah comes to comfort us! With those words we are reminded that we are precious and honored in God's sight. He says to the Israelites, "Do not fear."

God reminds the Israelites of their creation story and how He made them into a nation, calling us by name. Then he redeemed them from Egypt, punishing Pharaoh and drowning his armies in the Red Sea. He made Israel his people. He named them and they belonged to him.

God is not just the Creator; God is Israel's Creator. God is not merely the Holy One, but the Holy One of Israel. God is not just the King; God is your King. Because the Lord is their God and Israel is his people, they can be freed from the tyranny of fear.

Passing through the waters, walking through the fire—it makes no difference. The water will not overwhelm, and the fire will not burn; God will protect them. "Do not fear," says the Lord, "for I am with you".

This is the same message God has for Jesus as he rises from the waters of his baptism, "***You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased***". "I am with you."

In our Baptism, God says the same loving words. God has created us. In Baptism, God made us his own. We are God's people. God has named us, and we belong to him. And anytime we are

fearful, or anxious or worried, we can claim God's ownership that will bring us through any flood and fire, even death.

We are the Lord's because of what he has done. We may not deserve grace, but God is ever gracious through our Lord Jesus Christ. We may not be faithful, but God is ever faithful. We did not choose God, but God always chooses us. Therefore, the Lord is not just "the Savior;" he is "our Savior." He is not just the Lord God, but he is "the Lord our God."

We do not have to be afraid of what life throws at us. We will be tested on a personal level, and we all have our own challenges. We will also be tested on a national level as this country seeks to find a way to bring itself back from the brink of authoritarianism and selfish impulses that undermine the work of compassion, love, and justice that we hold dear. On Thursday, a service was held at the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. that marked both the Feast of the Epiphany and the first anniversary of the attack and insurrection on the U.S. Capitol.

Our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, deftly reminded us that this moment in our country, "...demands moral vision that sees beyond mere self-interest and beholds the common good — a spiritual strength stronger than any sword." Through flood, fire, insurrection, or attempted coups, and yes, even death, God never yields in his promise to redeem, to claim us as his own, forever.

I don't know if the words of Isaiah brought any comfort to my dying patient that day (I hope so), but I do pray that I won't wait until my end of days to understand the enormity of what it means to be marked as God's own, redeemed forever. Amen.