

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 10, 2016
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Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
“I will be with you”

During the summer months of my early university carrier, I worked installing siding on houses with my older brother. A strange job considering I have a fear of heights and most of the work was 20 feet high. One morning while opening a box of siding, I came face to face with what appeared to be a python of garter snakes. My fear of snakes must have overcome my fear of heights because I found myself on top of the roof before my brother even heard my screams of panic. Then my real fear came to the surface. I was on the roof with nowhere to go. So there I was screaming somehow hoping to be saved.

To add to my embarrassment, when my brother opened the box, all he found was a 12 inch Garter snake. He picked it up and took it to the farm across the street. Well, at least he didn't laugh at me. The rest of the day was spent looking down to ensure I didn't come up to another snake.

Doctors have uncovered over 500 phobias, among the most prominent are: the fear of flying, fear of heights, fear of mice, fear of close spaces, and in North America the number one fear is shared by the fear of snakes, the fear of spiders, and the fear of public speaking.

We can't control our reactions to phobias which are extreme and irrational fears, but many of us experience fears caused by real situations like: cancer or some other debilitating disease, poverty, growing old, loneliness, failure, losing someone close, and the list goes on. The things that we are afraid of may be different, but our reactions to fear are usually the same – our palms sweat, our mouths get dry, our stomachs churn — and we would do anything, make any sacrifice, just to make it go away. What is your greatest fear? For me, it is separation from God; the fear that my sins will be so grievous they will cause a chasm between me from God.

In today's passage from Isaiah, the prophet is also addressing the issue of fear, specifically the fear of abandonment, abandonment by God. The people of Israel were in exile in Babylon and they were afraid that God had forgotten them. Afraid that he'd abandoned them as a people.

Certainly, the Israelites had reason to be afraid. Because of their sins they felt that they were being punished by God. The Babylonians had captured Jerusalem and they were taken into exile. But God, in His grace, promised that, one day, he would rescue them. One day their hard service to Babylonia would be over, and God would bring them home. Unfortunately, it would take many years before they returned to Jerusalem.

Sometimes it seems like a long wait before we hear or see God's answer to our prayers. Sometimes the challenges of life in this broken and sinful world can make it seem like God has forgotten us, like He has left us to fend for ourselves. We feel like He has left us alone in our miserable situations, whatever they may be. Sometimes, it makes us wonder if God still loves us. Maybe it doesn't seem that way in our heads, but it can sure feel that way in our hearts. But through the words given to us by Isaiah, we can take comfort in God's promises:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. Do not fear, for I am with you.”

Twice in this passage God tells us to “do not fear”: “do not fear, for I have redeemed you” and “do not fear, for I am with you”. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.” To redeem something is to pay a price to get it back. To get the people of Israel back, God gave Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for them. He exchanged nations for the people of Israel but for us, for you and me, for us who are precious to Him, for us who He loves so much, for us He sacrificed even more, for us He paid the ultimate ransom, for us He exchanged His son.

Imagine you're in prison and you can't pay the fine. Your Father wants to get you out, but he can't pay it either. So instead, he sends your oldest brother, with his full agreement, and exchanges him for you. That's what God did. He gave up his only Son, to become our older brother. And God sent him to prison in our place. So fear not people of God! He has redeemed us. And He will continue to redeem us.

“Do not fear, for I am with you.” When we pass through the flood waters He will be with us. God doesn't promise that there won't be floods but when we go through them, He will hold them back from utterly destroying us, like He did for Israelites when they passed out of Egypt and through the Red Sea. The overwhelming floods of our own struggle will not wash us away. They will spray us, they will soak us, they will threaten to drown us, but they will not wash us away. They will not drown us for He will be with us to hold the flood waters back.

And when we pass through the fire, we will not be burned. We will sweat, we will tire, we will faint, but the fumes will not overcome us and the flames will not consume us. And when we pass through everything else, every other struggle imaginable, we will not be harmed for He is with us.

God never promises us an easy, comfortable or pain-free life in this world. This world is a harsh place to live in and there are many things to fear. People do not escape disease or accident or pain or loss. He does however ensure that we are His beloved children, and He is with us. Even in our darkest moments, He never abandons us. He will see us through to the end, through every trial, every pain and every sin. He is always beside us and he never stops loving us. This is demonstrated to us in the baptism that Jesus received at the hands of John, the baptism which ends with the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in bodily form of a dove, and a voice from heaven saying to him: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

God is pleased with his Son as he begins the ministry that will cause him to pass through the waters of death and to enter into the fires of hell. God is pleased because God loves him and He loves us. He loves us so much that He came to us in the flesh in the form of Jesus. From birth to death Jesus lived as one of us. Even though he was without sin he willingly went to John to be baptized. He was cleansed so that He could then cleanse us. He knows that if we are to be washed clean that he must come to wash us. Jesus enters into the dust and ashes of our soles and washes us and proclaims us to be clean and God is pleased by it.

We need not fear the waters for God is with us; the rivers will not sweep over us. We need not fear the fire for God is with us; we will not be burned, the flames will not set us ablaze. Because he loves us, because we are precious and honoured in God's sight, he will gather us, as he gathered Israel, from those places where judgement and where evil have scattered us to; those places of the heart and soul in which we hide or where we go when we are afraid.

Fear is not a bad thing. It exists for our protection as an early warning signal. But there is a big difference between the healthy fear that tells us to step away from the edge of a cliff and a constant fear that keeps us from living our lives. That type of fear keeps us in the background. It convinces us we can never accomplish our dreams, tells us to keep quiet, and separates us from the ones we love. Fear has an unparalleled ability to freeze us in our tracks, and limit what we are willing to try. Fear makes us lead a smaller life.

How many times have we turned away from an opportunity or even a relationship because we were too afraid to go for it? So when we are facing this kind of deep fear remember God's words from Isaiah, "Do not be afraid... I have redeemed you... I have called you by name... you are mine... you are precious in My sight... I love you...and I will be with you". Amen.