

January 11, 2004  
First Sunday after Epiphany  
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## Faith and Fear

Isaiah 43:1-7

*But now thus says the Lord,  
God who created you, O Jacob,  
God who formed you, O Israel:  
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.*

*The awareness of being a child of God tends to stabilize the ego  
and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power.*

*I have seen it happen again and again.*      --Howard Thurman,  
Jesus and the Disinherited

*Saddha [faith] is the willingness to take the next step, to see the unknown  
as an adventure, to launch a journey.*

--Sharon Salzberg,  
Faith: Trusting Your Own  
Deepest Experience

It was the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., a generation after much of the leadership of Israel had been deported to Babylon. The armies of Cyrus, king of Persia, were unclenching the fist of the Babylonian Empire, country by country. Israel's liberation was on the distant horizon. A prophet living and ministering in those years saw deeply into what was happening and perceived a new movement of God's redeeming spirit and power. He called for the people to get ready to go home, to make yet another journey. The traumatic journey into Exile was still fresh in the memory. Now there was a new word, the call to prepare to return home, to rebuild society and the temple.

God was doing a new thing (43:19). We might think that this would be easy. Going home at last! But the people had become adjusted to Exile. Life was not all that bad. We can accommodate to anything, even being at a standstill and going nowhere, even being unfulfilled with respect to what we are truly called to be. We resist change, even change that promises new life. Changes arouse fear.

There are times like that in our own journeys, as persons and as a community of faith. Times when things fall apart and we have to slog through the waters of chaos. And times when renewal is in the air. But it is always a journey, life itself and the life of faith. Nothing is permanent, nothing is fixed. Our most pressing spiritual work is to live our journey of life and faith with an awareness of God's presence, love, care, and guidance. If we neglect the most important dimension of our lives—the spiritual—then life is just a roller coaster going nowhere but up and down, up and down. However, if we grow in our capacity to touch the deep underground river of the sacred, of God, and let it well up into our lives, then our life's journey becomes a journey home, to our true selves.

Yet living out of a spiritual center seems so hard for us to do. We experience the constant changes of life. We go from one thing to the next. At times we feel like we are on a treadmill, all movement but no direction. We see around us the needs of people, our society, our world, and yet we don't know how to respond, or we try to respond to everything and feel like a ping-pong ball going from one thing to the next. That is why it is so crucial to be on an inward journey of prayer, silence, reflection, disciplining ourselves to take time each day for inner listening and being in the present moment. Only as we undertake that inward journey do we find a center out of which to live.

This what Isaiah says to the people: The God who made you, who shaped you from earth and breathed life into you, the God who called you into being as a people, who gave you a name—this God is saying to you, “Do not fear!” We hear this message so much throughout scripture: Do not fear! God says to Moses, when Moses is afraid to go back into Egypt—I will be with you. The angel says to Joseph—Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife! An angel comes to the shepherds to announce Jesus' birth—Do not be afraid! Jesus tells his disciples, when he is leaving them, going to his death—Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid! It is comforting to see that all of scripture acknowledges our fears and how badly we need to shed our fears in order to live, in order to be faithful, in order to make this journey of life and faith.

The biblical meaning of fear is holding back, shrinking from the process of life, the journey of faith. What fears do we have? What fears are holding us back from being the unique and gifted persons God made us to be? What fears are keeping us as a community from responding to the new things God is calling us to be and to do? If scripture is right, that fear is the greatest impediment to living and that we all have fears, then it is of tremendous importance that each of us become aware of our fears.

Maybe we are afraid of other people and what they will think of us. Will others like us, approve of us, if we really lived as our true, authentic selves? We have been convinced of a great lie—that we need other peoples' approval and affirmation to be who we really are. That's co-dependency, not true community, not true love. The love of others, their support, their encouragement, their affirmations, are important ingredients in creating healthy lives. But they are not THE essential thing. We can go our whole lives trying to gain the approval of others, and get it, and yet never be satisfied, never start living our own lives in freedom, joy, and purpose.

Maybe we are afraid of failure, that the dream, the vision that is embedded in our hearts as a bright secret we keep to ourselves, will not pan out. What if we move out in the direction of what we really feel called to do and we fail? There is no such thing as success and failure when it comes to living according to our true selves, our true callings. That's a lie put into us by our culture that worships what it calls success. What greater failure can there be than to never try to live as our hearts tell us to live?

Maybe as a community we are afraid of losing our sense of being in control, as illusory as that feeling is. What if things change? What if God's spirit moves us in different directions? What if others come into our community with new gifts and callings that challenge us to make room, to open up in new ways? If we let this fear control us, we become like Israel in Exile, adjusted to going nowhere, conformed to stagnation. Though we talk about journey, we are no longer on a journey.

Maybe our fear is of death, the ultimate reality that tells us we are not in control and that everything changes. So we play it safe, building secure and comfortable lives, convincing ourselves that it will all protect us from the naked truth of death. And yet our faith whispers to us that death is not an end but a passage, that dying is the process of new birth, resurrection. Our Christian practice of baptism tells us that we can go ahead and die, and get on with living, REAL

living. We die and are raised with Christ, says Paul. We can let go of the old, fearful, controlling self and put on a new self, the true self that loves beyond fear and death.

Do not fear, says God through Isaiah. I made you. I redeemed you. I gave you a name. You are mine. You are precious, honored, and loved eternally. The very foundation of life, the very power that called into being the galaxies and the mountains, the very voice, as Psalm 29 says, that shakes the forests and thunders over the seas, says to us, “You are mine. I am your Creator and Redeemer. I am with you forever. Do not be afraid!” It is the voice that said to Jesus at his baptism, and says to each of us, “You are my daughter, my son, my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” The antidote to fear is our listening to that voice of God in whom our lives are deeply and unshakably grounded.

This is the God who not only calls us to the journey but goes with us on the journey. Becoming more and more aware of our life in God, we discover a paradox. Life and faith have the nature of journey, movement, growth, change. And yet we have the sense of also being “at home” all along the way, of being accompanied. The journey is coming home to our true selves. The journey is our home.

The most fundamental affirmation of our lives comes not from other people, not from success, not from false securities, but from our belonging to God. Howard Thurman was dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University and founder of the first interfaith, interracial church in the nation, the Church for the Fellowship of all People in San Francisco. He was also the grandson of slaves. In his book Jesus and the Disinherited, Thurman deals with the struggles of people who are oppressed, impoverished, and otherwise put down, particularly in this society. He writes of the fear that is a rational response to the constant and real threats that surround the disinherited. What is the antidote to this fear for the persons who are powerless, the objects of prejudice, hate, and exploitation? It is spiritual, more so than economic or political. It is the simple, deep, clear knowledge that one is a child of God! Thurman shares these words, spoken to him as a child by his grandmother who heard them from a slave minister in secret religious meetings: “You—you are not niggers. You—you are not slaves. You are God’s children.” “The awareness of being a child of God,” writes Thurman, “tends to stabilize the ego and results in a new courage, fearlessness, and power. I have seen it happen again and again.” (p.50)

The same message resounds through the words of Isaiah as he rouses the people for the next step in their journey, the journey home, to journey of rebuilding, the journey of the new thing God is doing: God created you! God formed you! God redeemed you! God called you by name! You are precious in God’s sight, and honored and loved! That’s who you are. That’s how you can live your life. Don’t be afraid. Don’t hold back.

So this brings us to the meaning of faith. Faith is not, as centuries of orthodox Christianity would have us think, a matter of adhering to certain beliefs about God or Jesus or anything else. Faith is not a matter of thinking the “right” religious thoughts. Faith is not blindly obeying a set of rules. Faith is not making a mental leap to accept something obscure and unbelievable. Faith is an act of our whole being, an act of trust, of being open to God, to our own hearts, and to the movement of God’s spirit that is always stirring up new things and yet is always with us as comfort and guide and strength.

I am reading a book by Sharon Salzberg, called Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience. She is a meditation teacher and has been practicing Buddhism for more than thirty years. I was interested to find her definition of faith, coming out of Buddhist practice, having exactly the same meaning as in Hebrew and Christian scriptures and tradition. Salzberg writes: “[Faith] is an inner quality that unfolds as we learn to trust our own deepest experience.” (p. xiv) We might say that faith is that God-given capacity to trust our sensitivities to the voice of God. In Pali, the original language of Buddhist scriptures, the word for faith is *saddha*. It literally means “to place our heart upon” something or someone. Faith, in this sense, “is the willingness

to take the next step, to see the unknown as an adventure, to launch a journey.” (p. 12) In my limited studies of the major religious traditions, I find it exciting and encouraging that faith means basically the same thing in all of them—the willingness, the courage, to move out on the journey of life, to trust Life, or God, or Christ, as we follow that deep inward call from one moment of life to the next.

Life, with all its changes, will bring us times of suffering and joy, complexity and simplicity, struggle and peace. This is not avoidable. But how we meet this journey is all-important. Our fears hold us back and put us in prisons of isolation and disconnectedness. Faith opens the doors through which we can walk, from moment to moment, into the freedom and love and new life to which God calls us.

Can we overcome fear once and for all? I don’t know the answer to that one. The most “fearless” people of faith I’ve known have always confessed their persistent struggles with fear. To this Sharon Salzberg has a word of assurance: “Experiencing the power of faith doesn’t mean we’ve annihilated fear, or denied it, or overcome it through strenuous effort. It means that when we think we’ve conquered fear only to be once again overcome by it, we can still go on. It means feeling our fear and still remaining in touch with our heart, so that fear does not define our entire world, all we can see or do or imagine.” (p. 96)

In our own faith tradition we have the words such as those given to us today from the prophet Isaiah. At each juncture of our lives, when we feel our fear, when we want to hold back, when we shrink from life, we listen for that voice: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you and I will redeem you; I have called you and I will call you; I have been with you and I will be with you.