

January 7, 2007/First Sunday after Epiphany/David L. Edwards

I Will Be With You

Isaiah 43:1-7 *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.*

Luke 3:21-22 *And a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Recently I read THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD, Rabbi Harold Kushner's reflections on Psalm 23. Kushner's gleaning of the spiritual message of Psalm 23 is the same as in our reading from Isaiah 43: The Bible does not promise that we will not suffer, that we will not experience difficulties of various kinds, as individuals and as a human family. Religious faith is not a protective shield that deflects bad things. However, faith IS our relationship with God who promises to be with us and to love us. This gives us the courage and the hope to live through the difficult experiences that inevitably come our way, even in a transforming way.

In the background of Isaiah's words is the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon. They will be defeated by the Babylonian army and taken off into a strange country for nearly three generations. There is no escaping this traumatic experience. Isaiah reminds the people that God is and will remain with them through these troubled waters, and God will continue to work for their return home and their healing as a society. It all has to do with their relationship with God. That is what faith is, seeking and trusting in that relationship. This will sustain them through the challenges ahead and enable their healing when they return from exile.

We Are Loved, We Belong

First, God says through Isaiah: I created you, O Jacob. I formed you, O Israel. Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are precious in my sight, you are honored, and I love you. What could be more important for our well-being than knowing at the core of our being that we are loved, knowing that we belong?

Some of us do not feel loved or cherished or honored. Some feel that they do not belong. We have all experienced rejection to some degree. We have experienced the kind of love that is always conditioned by how we behave, what we think, or what we achieve. This happens not only in our families and in society, but tragically also in religion, in the church, which gets its own message wrong. The message of scripture about us as human beings is NOT that we are hopeless, depraved sinners who can do nothing good. The basic biblical view is that we are created by God and pronounced GOOD, that no matter how lost we may become, we are still loved by God. The story of the so-called "fall," a term never used in Hebrew scriptures themselves, neither says nor implies that the disobedience of Adam and Eve resulted in a loss of that original goodness. Their relationship with God was seriously strained, but not lost. As that story unfolds, God continues to work to maintain the relationship. In so many places in scripture, like this reading from Isaiah, the message is clearly and emphatically that we are loved, cherished, and held in high esteem by the God who made us.

Our primary spiritual work is to remind ourselves each and every day that we are loved by the very power that called the universe into being and gave us life. We are indelibly connected to the Source of Life, which is not only benevolent but also loving. The spiritual life, the practices of prayer and meditation and so forth that we work with, are for the purpose of keeping us reminded of and rooted in that primary awareness that we are loved and we belong.

God Is and Will Be With Us

Then God says: 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 second thing about this reading has to do with our basic view of life itself. What about the difficult things in life? What about suffering in the world? If God loves us so much, why can't God keep us from suffering? The Bible doesn't really answer these questions. It takes suffering for granted as a part of life. Some suffering is the result of our own attitudes and actions. This is consequential suffering, the pain that we cause others or ourselves because of our greed, self-centeredness, violence, or unhealthy attachments. The remedy for this kind of suffering the Bible calls "repentance," or changing our minds and the directions of our lives. Here God is with

us as the power that enables us to move in new directions, forgiving the past, and opening up the future. God is with us to help us change harmful patterns of thinking and living.

There are other kinds of suffering that happen to us. Illness. Tragedy. Accident. The actions of others that inflict suffering. Wars. Prejudice. Hate. Ignorance. These are things that happen to us, that we cannot avoid or even prevent. We can work to eradicate illness, violence, injustice, and indeed we are called to that work. In the meantime, we need to find a way of living in the midst of these things without avoiding their reality or losing hope.

Scripture is very realistic about life. There is suffering as well as blessing. There is dying as well as living. There is sickness as well as health. There is brokenness and there is healing. What scripture does say clearly is that God will be with us as we go through these things. When we pass through these turbulent waters, these rivers that feel like they are going to sweep us away, we do not go alone. God is with us as the power of life, of healing, of peace, of justice, enabling us to face and go through experiences of suffering.

It is important that the text says that we pass through these rough waters, that we walk through fire. In most cases, these experiences do not last forever. They have an ending, though at the time they feel as though they will last forever. Some experiences do have lasting effects, like debilitating illness or injury. But even then, we have a choice. We can see the experience as “ruining our lives,” or we can look deeper within our own hearts and find that there are still doors that can open, different ways to live that find new ways of living. It has to do with our awareness of God who is with us through these things. If we let the experience of suffering close us down, we then see ourselves as victims and choose to remain as victims. We fall into a pattern of blaming others or the world or ourselves. If on the other hand we keep open to our relationship with God who is with us, we realize that we are “more than” our pain or suffering or experience. We are able to learn the things our experiences of suffering can teach us, the spiritual lessons that enable us to become inwardly stronger, wiser, and more compassionate toward others and ourselves.

I think this is what it means to pass through the threatening waters and not be overcome, to walk through the fire and not be burned. To me this means that the deepest core of our being, what we call the heart or the soul or the spirit, cannot be ultimately damaged or wounded. That is because at the core of our being we are connected to

God who loves us and is with us. This is the only way I can explain why we encounter very difficult and painful experiences, and yet as we go through them, we touch something so deep in ourselves that we are not overwhelmed or overcome by those experiences. This does not say that the pain is not real, but that we have it within us to embrace the whole of our lives, including the most difficult times, because we are loved by and belong to God.

All of this points us to the importance of making a serious commitment to what we call the inward journey. In my work as a pastor, I have seen that those who encounter experiences of suffering and find within those experiences a way of affirming life are those who have cultivated a life of prayer, an inward life. This enables us to stay in touch with our fears, anxieties, and discouragements, and to keep open to the presence and love of God in the midst of whatever it is we are going through. Taking time each day to sit in silence, to become aware of what is going on in our hearts and minds, to look more deeply into our experiences and feelings, enables us to “be still and know that God is God.” Even if we take no more than a few minutes each day for this inward journey, we will find that when some experience of suffering or pain comes into our lives, we are able to resist running from it and, as our text says, pass through it without being overcome.

This First Sunday after Epiphany traditionally lifts up the story of Jesus’ baptism. I think this is what is going on when God says to Jesus: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. God is saying: I love you; you belong to me. And Jesus lived fully this life of faith, of trusting in that relationship of love and belonging, even through suffering. In this way, he is our savior, our teacher, our guide, or as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. In him we find the strength, wisdom, courage, and joy to live as those who are loved and belong.