

January 10, 2009/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."*

One day last week, everything was going wrong. Just when I thought things could not get worse, they did. By the end of the day, I had forgotten everything I know about practicing peacefulness and faith. The next morning I received an e-mail from one of our members who had become aware of my sorry spiritual condition. It gently reminded me of how we lose sight of the hidden ways God is working things out, beyond our limited vision. I was also reminded of something I had said in a recent sermon about just such situations. I gratefully realized that this was a perfect example of what we call accountability. It is our willingness to share honestly how we are doing with our spiritual lives and to receive from others the help, guidance, and reminders that we need concerning the life of faith to which we have committed ourselves.

This experience also connected, in my mind, with the reading from Isaiah 43. What is the message of our faith in situations when things fall apart, when we feel lost and cannot see our way ahead? My experience that day was, I realize, not that big a deal in the broader scope of life. People face situations of far greater suffering. Two days ago Kaye and I learned of a terrible thing that happened to a friend. Steve Creech is the musician and sound engineer who guided me through many recording sessions and helped me become a better musician while we lived in Indiana. He was in Nashville when his sister called to tell him that his Indianapolis studio had burned to the ground. Steve had spent twenty years in that place, doing what he loved most--helping artists express their gifts and realize their dreams. All his equipment and his precious instruments are gone, and he had no insurance.

I have been reading Greg Mortenson's second book, *STONES INTO SCHOOLS*. It is about the work of the Central Asia Institute in Afghanistan, building schools in the midst of war, threats from the Taliban, and earthquakes, assisting local communities in providing education for their children, particularly for girls. The chapters on the devastation of earthquakes had been overwhelming to read. Thousands of children were killed inside of poorly built schools that simply collapsed on them. The vision of CAI was to find a way to build new and substantial schools in those devastated villages.

Our scriptures do not promise escape from suffering. Religious faith is not a protective shield that deflects bad things. Neither is it a way of controlling circumstances so that they come out the way we want. Faith is our relationship with God who made us, loves us, and promises to be with us. This gives us the peace and courage to live through the difficult experiences. Not just to survive them, but to experience a deeper life and faith, and to be open to the new life that God is bringing about.

Isaiah's words were spoken to a people facing exile. They would be defeated by the Babylonian army and many taken off into a strange country for three generations. There would be no escape from this traumatic experience. Isaiah reminds the people that God is and will remain with them through these turbulent waters. God will continue to work for their return home and their healing as a society. It all had to do with their relationship with God. That is what faith is--staying open to and trusting in that relationship. This would sustain Israel through the challenges ahead and enable their healing when, at last, they would return from exile and start rebuilding.

First, God says through Isaiah: I created you. I formed you. 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 in our deepest heart that we are loved, that we belong, no matter what happens? We may not feel loved or cherished or honored. We may feel that we do not belong. We have all experienced some degree of rejection. We have experienced the kind of love that is 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. However, the core message of scripture is NOT that we are hopeless, depraved

sinners who can do nothing good. The 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. In many places in scripture, like this reading from Isaiah, the message is clearly and emphatically that we are loved, cherished, and honored by the God who made us.

Our primary spiritual work is to remind ourselves 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 benevolent and 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.

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, the flame shall not consume you. This has to do with our basic view of life. What about the difficult things in life? What about suffering? If God loves us so much, why can't God keep us from suffering? The Bible doesn't really answer these questions. It deals with suffering 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 actions, attitudes, or unhealthy attachments. The remedy for this kind of suffering the Bible calls "repentance," the changing of our minds and the directions of our lives. Here God is with us as the power that enables us to move in new directions, letting go of the past, and opening up to the future.

There are other kinds of suffering. Illness. Tragedy. Accident. The actions of others that inflict suffering. These are things that happen to us. We can work to eradicate illness, violence, injustice, and indeed we are called to that work. Yet, we also need to find ways of living in the midst of these things without denying their reality, adding to them, 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 when we pass through these turbulent waters that feel as though they will sweep us away, we do not go alone. God is with us as the power of life, of healing, of peace, 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 or trauma. But even then, we have a choice. We can see the experience as "ruining our lives," or we can look deeper and find that there are still doors that can open, different ways to move toward new life. 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 live as victims. We fall into blaming others or the world. 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 experiences of pain or suffering. We are able to learn from our experiences of suffering 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. The deepest core of our being--the heart, or soul, or 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 what we call the inward journey. In my work as a pastor, I have seen so often that those who encounter suffering and find within it a way of affirming life are those who have cultivated a life of prayer, an inward life. This enables us to acknowledge our fears, anxieties, and discouragements, and yet 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.

I think this is the same thing that 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. 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 fulfiller of our faith. In him we find in our own lives the way of wisdom, courage, and peace to live as those who are loved and who belong, in all the circumstances of our lives.