

January 13, 2013 / 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."*

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 does not make us immune to difficult or painful things. However, faith IS about our relationship with God who promises to be with us and to love us, no matter what. This gives us courage and peace to live through, and even be strengthened by, the hard experiences that inevitably come our way. I have come to believe that our spiritual struggles have mostly to do with our becoming closed to the Loving Presence that is everywhere and in all things, which we call God. Our spiritual practice is to keep open to God who is always with us.

Isaiah's words are from the period of the exile of the people of Israel in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. They would be overrun by the Babylonian army and taken off into a strange country for nearly three generations. There is no escaping this, but Isaiah reminds the people that God is and will remain with them through these troubled waters. 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 and returning to that relationship. This will sustain them through the challenges of exile and enable their healing when they return from exile, says Isaiah.

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 and deepest happiness than knowing in our innermost heart that we are loved, that we belong? And to know that this love and belonging is at the heart of the universe itself, and is knit into every fiber of our

being?

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, or lack of love from those we expected would love us. We have experienced the counterfeit kind of love that is doled out conditionally, according to 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 word 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 and belong to God. The story of the so-called “fall,” a term never used in Hebrew scriptures themselves, neither says nor implies that the disobedience of the first man and woman resulted in a loss of that original goodness (Gen. 2-3). Their relationship with God gets seriously strained, but not lost. As that story unfolds, God continues to work to repair and maintain the relationship. In so many places in scripture, like this reading from Isaiah, the message is clearly and emphatically that we are loved and cherished by the God who made us.

Our primary spiritual work is to remember 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 experienced as 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. In our daily times of silence, reflection, and prayer, we can become aware of the other voices in us that tell us we are not loved, or valuable, or that we do not belong. We can, with patient listening, understand where they came from, and then let them, over time, fall into silence as we listen more intently to that Voice that tells us we are, indeed, loved and that we belong. That belovedness and belonging are prior to and stronger than the human expressions of love that are its lesser expressions, and often its opposite.

God Is and Will Be With Us

Then God says through Isaiah: 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.

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, or the earth, God's good creation. 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 as we put on a "new mind", changing harmful patterns of thinking and living.

There are other kinds of suffering that happen to us, which we could call circumstantial suffering. Illness. Tragedy. Accident. Or the actions of others that cause us hurt. These are things that happen to us, that we are not able to avoid or prevent or otherwise control. We need to find a way of living in the midst of these things, neither denying their reality nor being overcome by them. This is the way of going through troubled waters without drowning, the way of walking through fire without being burned.

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, though at the time they feel as though they will never end. Some experiences do have lasting effects, like debilitating illness or injury, physical or emotional. 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 to 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. We demand that others relate to us mainly in terms of our brokenness or woundedness. If on the other hand we keep open to our relationship with God who is with us, who is still the source of life and new life, 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. 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.

As I was writing this, I remembered the children with whom I worked so many years ago at Boston Children's Hospital Medical Center. I was a nursing assistant, or orderly, on the cardiac medical and surgical division. I learned so much from children facing serious and sometimes fatal heart conditions and complications. For the most part, they were able to meet their hospitalizations and the procedures they had to go through with remarkable equanimity. This was especially true of the children whose parents did not try to shield or over-protect them. I could say "courage", but it was simply that the children met and went through whatever it was they faced, without the kinds of things we often find in ourselves as we grow older. They, of course, felt pain and fear. Yet there was no self-pity. There were no feelings that life was somehow unfair. The children were, and continue to be, my spiritual teachers as I remember them. They seemed still to have that inner sense of being loved and belonging, with which we are all born, and yet tend to lose as we grow up and become shaped by our culture. I believe we can still touch that deepest part of our being, and can recover and grow in that innate sense of being loved and of belonging, that God is and will always be with us.

All of this points us to the importance of making and working with 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 be in touch with our fears, anxieties, and discouragements, yet not let them overwhelm us. Spiritual practice helps us 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 patiently and compassionately 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, the one who goes before us, blazing the trail. Following him, we find in ourselves the strength, wisdom, courage, and joy to live also as those who are loved and belong.