

Isaiah 43:1-7; Baptism of Our Lord C, 1/9/21 **Pastor Ellen Schoepf**

I don't know about you, but I have been quite challenged by the way COVID-19 is constantly causing us to alter our plans and make changes in our daily lives. Shifting again to online worship only for this Sunday and next Sunday is just one example of this challenge. Throughout these past two years, I have experienced a constant struggle within myself as we routinely must make new decisions while responding to the latest, unexpected challenges COVID-19 creates before us and around us. And, quite frankly, we will not see an end to this struggle and constant state of uncertainty and change until more people are vaccinated!

We all struggle with change in one way or another. Some change is helpful and transformative, and some change can be devastating. One of the greatest challenges for all of us is the change that ensues when unexpected situations arise, and our very world seems to shift on its axis. Such change is often abrupt, disruptive, life-threatening and life changing. This is the type of change we experienced when COVID initially broke into our lives. As we experience this kind of change, we tend to find ourselves in a place of languishment and fear, fear about an uncertain future.

When talking about such monumental change, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Long, a Presbyterian theologian, shares a story about the historian, Eric Hobsbawm. Long writes:

Hobsbawm remembered when his safe and secure world became a world of terror. He grew up as a Jewish orphan in Berlin. On a cold January day in 1933 when he was only 15 years old, he was walking his little sister home from school when he saw at a newsstand a headline bearing frightening news that would change his life, change the life of all Jews, change the life of the whole world. "Adolph Hitler Appointed Chancellor of Germany," the headline read. Later in his life, Hobsbawm reflected on that moment and said it was as if "we were on the Titanic, and everyone knew it was going to hit the iceberg." As Europe hurdled out of control toward World War II, the old world was violently ripped apart, and the new and uncertain world began to be born. Hobsbawm said that it was difficult to describe "what it meant to live in a world that was simply not expected to last." It was like living, he said, "between a dead past and a future not yet born."

For **multiple** reasons, that is the kind of change we are experiencing, and it creates a feeling of fear and uncertainty. ***In many ways, we are living between a dead past and a future not yet born.*** And, that is **also** what the Jewish people had been experiencing at the time of Isaiah's writing in our Old Testament reading today. Isaiah was writing to and for Jewish exiles who had experienced monumental, earth-shattering change. Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Jewish people had been taken into captivity in Babylon! Their world had been shaken and turned upside down. Living in exile, their past was dead, obliterated. They were in a hard

place, living in fear and imagining themselves on the precipice of extinction under Babylonian domination. Feeling abandoned by God, their future seemed truly uncertain. Into this setting the prophet speaks a word from the Lord saying, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

Do not be afraid. These few words are some of the most frequently spoken words we hear in scripture. When the angel appeared to Mary announcing she would give birth to a son – talk about an uncertain future for a teenage, unmarried girl, especially at that point in time – the angel said, “Do not be afraid.” When the angels appeared to the shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth, they said, “Do not be afraid.” The first words spoken to the disciples at the empty tomb on Easter morning were, “Do not be afraid.” And, when the resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples who were huddled in a locked room because of fear, his words were, “Do not be afraid.”

I have to say that, as I studied these scripture readings for today, they meant a great deal to me and brought comfort to my struggling, aching heart. We are living in a time when the past and so much of what we knew as normal is dead. Quite frankly, our world will likely never again be what it was before COVID-19. As COVID continues to explode around us, the future that we long for is not yet born, and we really do not know what that

future will look like. Yet, amid this uncertainty, we hear the words, “Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”

There is much in our lives today that creates a sense of fear. If we follow the news and keep abreast of what is happening within our own political system and present culture, there is a **plenty** that can produce uncertainty and fear within us. We daily hear rhetoric that is intended to produce division, fear, and anxiety. The challenges we currently face seem monumental. However, we need to understand that every day of our lives is lived between the days of a dead past and days of an uncertain future not yet born. And, while this creates within us a sense of fear and anxiety, Isaiah’s words to us on this day cut to the core of our anxiety as they **graciously descend** into the depth of our fear. Listen as Isaiah speaks the message of God to us, to you, “Do not be afraid, I am with you. I created you. I formed you. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. **You are mine.**”

Today, we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord and, as we celebrate this day, we remember **our** baptisms. We remember that we have been baptized into the **community of faith**. When water was poured on our heads, we heard our very **name** spoken as we heard that we were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We heard

God's **Word** spoken to us, saying, "I created you. I formed you. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. **You are mine.**" Our names are **forever** joined to God's name. God has called us by name and claimed us as God's own.

We have no idea what the future holds for anyone of us. We pray our lives will be filled with joy, with health, and with peace. However, we also know that because we are human, we will face some very challenging times in life. We will pass through the waters of life's hardship. Just as the Jewish people discovered, faith does not protect us from the realities of being human and the reality of pain and hardship in life. Yet, we also know that God knows our **very names**. God will **never** forget us, God will **never** leave us alone, and God will **never** let go of us. God will be present to us at **every** turn. God says to each one of us:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through the fire, the flame shall not consume you. I have called you by name and you are mine.

Knowing this, we can live with hope, trusting our entire life journey, both our present and future, to the God who holds us and loves us.

The late Catholic priest and theologian, Henri Nouwen, once told a story about a terrible dream that plagued him for many nights. He dreamed that he was traveling in some distant city, and he ran into someone with

whom he had gone to high school. This former classmate would say, “Henri, haven’t seen you in years. What have you done with your life?” Henri felt that question sounded like judgment. While he had done some good things with his life, he also had had some struggles and challenges. When his old classmate asked this question, he did not know what to say. Then, one night Henri had another dream. He was waiting outside the throne room of God, and he found himself quivering in fear. He just knew the almighty God would speak to him saying, “Henri, what have you done with your life?” Then, in his dream, when the door opened to God’s throne room, the room was filled with light and he was astonished to hear God speaking to him in a gentle voice as God lovingly said, “Henri, it’s good to see you. I hear you had a rough trip, but I’d love to see the pictures of your journey.”

This world in which we live can at times be dangerous, and we all live between a dead past and an uncertain future, a future yet unborn. However, we live knowing that Immanuel, **God with us**, is lovingly present to us and walking **with** us throughout life. And, we can place our trust in this God who cherishes us and loves us with a love that will never let us go. God is saying to each one of us, “**Fear not. I know you. I have called you by name and you are mine.**”