First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

September 25, 2022

Do Not Fear

Isaiah 41:9-10

**9**

I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.

**10**

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

As you all know, I made a commitment to myself that I would primarily preach from the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a commitment I made to keep myself from cherry picking and only preaching on scripture passages I like or agree with. The whole point is to not only provide you with some continuity in the message, but also to stretch myself as a preacher. Finding something meaningful to say about difficult passages means that I have to study harder, dig deeper and listen more closely to what the Spirt is saying, in order to come up with a sermon each week. It’s not always easy; in fact there are times I wish I hadn’t committed myself to this path, but I’m not one to break a promise, if I can possibly avoid it.

Today, however, I have broken my rule and have chosen this passage from Isaiah, because it speaks to so many things that are happening in my own life and the lives of many in this congregation.

Isaiah is one of my favorite Old Testament prophets, because 2,400 years after the prophet put these words to paper, it is very clear that Isaiah had a tremendously prophetic voice. It was Isaiah, after all, who clearly and distinctly prophesied the coming of the Messiah, and it was Isaiahs’ prophesies that were relied on to help convince a skeptical people of Jesus’ true nature.

This particular text was written during the Babylonian exile, which occurred between the years 597 and 538 BC, a period of almost 70 years. Imagine what it must have been like for those who had watched the city of Jerusalem fall, the Temple; the most sacred place in all of Judaism, destroyed, their King, his court and all the prominent members of society, carried away to become slaves of another King. It must have felt like God had abandoned them. Imagine, too, what it must have been like for the several generations of people who were born into captivity, who only knew of Jerusalem, the Temple and Jewish life from hearing stories from their parents and grandparents.

As the years came and went, it’s not difficult to imagine that these captives and their children and grandchildren must have been tempted to give up all hope of ever seeing their homeland again. And, we are told, that many did. Many became resigned to their fate, many began to intermarry with their Babylonian neighbors, many began to build lives for themselves and their families and many began to forget where they came from or who their God was.

Still being slaves in a foreign land, is never an ideal situation and there were those who longed for freedom. And that’s where this passage comes into play.

In verse 9, we hear God, speaking through Isaiah, reminding the captured and enslaved Israelites of whose they are and the fact that God hadn’t rejected them, contrary to all the evidence in front of them: “I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said, ‘You are my servant’; I have chosen you and have not rejected you.” And in verse 10, God continues, saying, “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

While it would take another 40 years, or so, for the Israelites to be freed, when Cyrus the Great defeated the Babylonian empire and allowed the captives to return home, these words must have given great comfort to many and made their burdens a bit lighter.

But, it’s not always easy to believe these words, especially when the going gets tough. And, right now, it’s tough going for many of us. By now most of you know what I’m dealing with in my personal life, and the anger, frustration; that sense of being totally overwhelmed, as I watch someone very close to me slip away due to dementia, is something that many of you can relate to.

At the end of my trip to Palm Springs, last week, I was standing at the curb at 4:30 in the morning, waiting for my ride to the airport, hoping that I’d get there in time to make a 6 AM flight home. It was dead silent and I had a moment to reflect on the previous five days. It had been an absolutely insane few days, filled with meetings with doctors, nurses and case workers, trying to find a place where Michael could be cared for and be safe, and dealing with the reality that someone I’ve know and loved for the better part of 40 years was slipping away.

There had been so many things that could have gone wrong; so many roadblocks that could have derailed the entire process, but as I stood there in the cool early morning, thinking about everything, I realized that God had shown up at every step in the entire process. Everything that could have gone wrong, simply hadn’t gone wrong. Every roadblock that had been thrown up, was brought down, sometimes literally minutes before disaster hit.

As I got to the airport, checked my bag and boarded my flight, I realized that God had been holding me; that God had been lifting me up in his right hand; that God had simply walked alongside of me during a very difficult time, and that I had nothing to fear.

You’d think that as a Pastor, this wouldn’t have surprised me but, honestly, it did. You see, I sometimes forget Isaiah’s words. I sometimes forget Romans 8:38-39, where Paul writes, **38**For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, **39**nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Sometimes, in the midst of everyday life, I simply forget to trust in the God that created me and loves me, no matter what.

Yet, in spite of the fact that I forget to trust in God’s promise, in spite of the fact that my faith in this promise isn’t nearly strong enough, God continues to show up in my life, exactly on time.

That’s the thing about God; there’s never been a time in my life where God has walked away from me. Oh, there have been plenty of times where I’ve walked away from God; plenty of times where I didn’t believe God could love someone like me; plenty of times when my faith was weak, but God didn’t throw up God’s hands and say, “Oh brother!” “Why waste my time with this one?” He doesn’t get it, “I’m just going to walk away.” Instead, God continues to show mercy and grace, even to someone as pig headed and stubborn as me.

The challenges I face in the coming weeks and months, are formidable and there will continue to be times where I will feel overwhelmed. Yet, I know that whatever comes, I will not have to go through it alone. I’ll close with these words from the hymn How Firm a Foundation, which were inspired by today’s passage:

*“When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.”*

These are God’s words; this is God’s unfailing promise, to all of us. It may seem that God has turned away from us, but I know that God is with us, whether we realize it or not, whether our faith is strong or weak, whether we think we deserve it or not. Because, in the end, God has not abandoned us, and when we walk with God, we will never, ever walk alone. **AMEN**