

Baptism of the Lord
January 10, 2016
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Text: Isaiah 43:1-7

Things that scare me: Blank computer documents with only that pulsing black cursor, Fox News, clowns, preaching to a sanctuary full of people smarter than myself, heights, having two teens that drive, accidentally hurting the people I love, my vocational future, snakes, ending up alone for the rest of my life, and the dark.

Yes, I am afraid of the dark. In fact, just this past Sunday night, I was sharing this little known Beth fact with Fish Club, our middle school youth group. My fear of the dark was most acute when I was younger, but for as long as I can remember until about the age of 19, I was particularly terrified. The fear would descend like a thick curtain at bedtime. My parents would tuck me in and pray with me each night and then I would read books, sometimes until 1 or 2 in the morning, until exhaustion would possess me into unsettled sleep. I kept my desk light on the whole night. My experience was that if I were to turn off the lights and go to sleep, like a “normal” person, there would be some evil presence in the room that would attack me. Like many fears, I knew in my head that this was completely irrational. But knowing this did not settle my fear, it made it worse. In fact, I had so much shame regarding this ridiculous fear that I told no one, not even my parents, until I was a freshman in college. I was scared of the dark as a freshman in college! So if you need to feel better about anything in your life right now, you can at least say, “my day might be bad, but at least I am not a 19 year old woman sleeping with a desk lamp on”.

It wasn't until I had the guts to finally confess this secret to my college roommate that the power of this fear began to lessen. She didn't laugh at me, she didn't call me stupid; other fears of mine, In fact, she was so compassionate and validating, honoring how hard this was for me to share. My roommate entered the darkness with me, enabling me to face it. Sharing that fear with another was perhaps the deepest intimacy I had ever experienced with another human being. Knowing I was not alone didn't dissipate the fear, but it empowered me enough to actually address it. I soon got professional help to address chronic anxiety.

I think fear is one of those universal human experiences. We might not have anything else in common with another person, but we are all intimate with fear. I did a deep, detailed research on the words “fear in the Bible” in Google, which I realize is kind of like saying “jumbo shrimp” or “president trump”, and I found that variations on the phrase “fear not” appear anywhere from 365 to 500 times in the Bible. If we wanted to, we could do a yearlong study on fear and never have to look up a scripture passage twice. Amazing, isn't it? Throughout the canon, fear plays a large role. We have Adam and Eve who are naked and afraid after the fall. God telling an elderly and childless Abraham to not be afraid. God then going on to tell the shamed, alone, and misunderstood Hagar to not be fearful. Moses tells the recently freed Israelites to not be afraid as they approach the Red Sea, which would appear to be a roadblock, until God miraculously opens up the sea to rescue them from the pursuing Egyptian army. The stories about God's presence in

the midst of seemingly insurmountable obstacles throughout the old and new testaments is almost constant.

We have one such example in our Isaiah text today. The prophet Isaiah is speaking to the Jews of Judah as they are exiled in Babylon. Due to political circumstances beyond their control, they have lost their community, identity, livelihoods, homes, organized spirituality, and even families. Many generations before, God promises the people this in Genesis 12: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Yet their lives seem to be the exact opposite of what that promise entails. What cognitive dissonance this promise is in the midst of such chaos. Of course they are frightened. They are not only fearful, they are despairing. They are living an annihilation, not an “Amen”. This is not just fear of the dark, this is existing in the dark. There is no desk lamp to dissipate this darkness.

What powerful words this is when God through Isaiah says to the Jews “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; 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 might this feel like to hear these words? They are already afraid. They are already drowning. They are already being burned. Might these words bring comfort, or is it disruptive?

One of my pet peeves, maybe you can relate to this, is when you’re going through something awful and people say things to you like “Good things come to those who wait”. Or “time heals all wounds” or “what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger” or my absolute least favorite “God has a plan for you”. When people say things like this, it feels like the pain is misunderstood and minimized. It demonstrates a lack of willingness to get in the mire with you. A true spirit of justice honors the pain of oppression.

So how is this Isaiah passage different? How is this not just a superficial platitude?

Well to start, it fully honors the fact that things are not how they were intended to be. The darkness is not imagined, it is real. Waters and rivers flood. Fire destroys. Other countries occupy your daily existence. No amount of keeping the light on will end this darkness. This is not the hallmark of the great nation God told these people they were to be. Life is an absolute mess.

Even more profoundly, God is not only present in this darkness, God is actively at work to use it for redemption instead of destruction. God is IN the flood and waters in such a way that as God’s people enter that which they think will destroy, God promises to save. God is yet again working through a Red Sea.

True confession, I have always struggled with the Reformed approach to providence and God’s sovereignty. Many people understandably love Heidelberg Catechism question and answer number one, but I take pause with it. It states, “What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood and has set me free from all the power of the devil. (and here is the doozy) He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;[indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

I struggle with this, because it can be easily construed to paint God as one who wills injustice. That because God plans everything, God actually wills the evil forces at work in our world. While this Heidelberg answer recognizes the presence of God being present and at work in injustice, it fails to honor the fact that God hates injustice and oppression and that the work of God is to enter in to destruction not to simply repurpose it, but to enter into it to overcome it and set things right.

Here in Isaiah, we see God hates injustice. We see a God who is at work in disaster in ways we cannot see to set things right. God doesn't will overwhelming waters and fires. Rather God assures that God is already at work in them and that though they are a source of misery and fear, God's people will not be destroyed, but be redeemed. God, who created this nation and called them blessed, is at work in the present to redeem, so that they will be again the people God created them to be.

We see this work not only in Israel and Judah, but throughout all human history. God is both involved and transcendent of time, entering into fear and darkness so that we will be redeemed to be who we were created to be. Nothing epitomizes this more than baptism. God does not look at creation, with all of its destruction from afar. God sends Jesus to enter in to the very front lines of destruction, the overwhelming waters, in order to redeem all that God has created. Jesus enters into our flood waters of life to reveal that he is not only present in it, but is using it to bring about our salvation; to bring freedom to all of us who are enslaved. God does not leave us in the dark alone, God sends us a roommate to remind us that we are beloved, not alone, and in the process of being delivered, even if we do not yet experience the fruits of that deliverance.

God is at the work of redemption in all areas of life. God is at work in all of our world's darkness. Just because we can't see, doesn't mean God can't see. God is at work in the life of a starving Syrian woman. God is at work in the life of a new ISIS recruit. God is at work in the life of the formerly incarcerated man trying to reconnect with his family. God is at work in the body of a three year old boy suffering from cancer. God is at work in the presidential race. Even in Donald Trump. God is at work in your divorce. In the argument with your Mother. In your learning disability. In your food addiction. Because friends, God is always present in the dark; all of it. This doesn't always mean that we get the neat, answers that we want, but it does mean we can put our fears aside and push towards our fears and not hide from them.

And just as we are baptized as Jesus was baptized, we too join in the work in the floods of our world. If we want to draw closer to God, we draw closer to where God is at work. In the floods. In the fire. In the hospital. In the discussions about politics. In the elementary school tutoring program. In the living room of the neighbor needing a friend. Just as Christ enters the waters and

the darkness, we are to do the same. Isaiah tells us to pass through the water, not sit on the bank and watch it flow by.

In closing, I will read again these words for you from the God who loves you enough to send you a desk lamp and an understanding college roommate. “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. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”