

Songs of Presence and Assurance
Isaiah 43:1-4a
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
Isaiah 43:1-4a
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Friends, in times such as these we need words like the ones we heard from Isaiah today.

Do not fear.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.

When you pass through rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.

When you walk through fire you shall not be burned.

The flame shall not consume you.

You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

We need to hear these words.

Because we are overwhelmed. Even those of us who are doing our best are sometimes struggling.

I was just in a conversation the other day where I was asked how I am doing and how my family is doing. And the answer I tend to use in these COVID times is, "We are better than we deserve to be." I say that not to be self-deprecating, but because I recognize how privileged we are. We are a two income household and both of us continue to be employed. My husband works from home and I have the flexibility to work from home or from my office at the church. Our children are old enough not to need babysitters if we can't be with them. They are self-motivated enough to do what they need to do whether that be chores around the house or school work. They learn easily and will succeed whether they have school in person or online. And they have each other, which is no small thing. While siblings can be each other's worst enemies, they can also be each other's best friend. So, to have two children close in age with many of the same interests is a gift.

All of this is true and I don't want to ever lose sight of the privilege that is deeply woven into our existence.

Meanwhile, still we struggle. Still our children miss their friends and their routine. Still my husband, who usually travels for work, misses those interactions. Still I miss hugging you on Sunday mornings. Still we miss the joys of vacations and dinner out and gathering with friends and family. And even though we manage to like each other most days, being mostly with just the other members of our household has its own

challenges. So, even in our privileged position, these days wear on us and present new dilemmas.

Meanwhile, there are people who live with so much more that overwhelms them:

- People are grieving, losing loved ones to this virus that has invaded our lives or having to say goodbye to loved ones without being physically present in their last days.
- People are losing jobs and struggling to pay their rent and mortgages, to feed their children, to secure healthcare.
- People are struggling with mental health, experiencing increasing levels of anxiety and depression and, it seems, increasing instances of suicide.
- People are feeling more isolated than usual and sometimes losing touch not only with the people they love, but with their best selves.

And while the joys of our lives are still real, this is a time when we need these words. This is a time when we need the reminder of God's presence with us and God's love for us.

And while it is good to remember that these words first came to a people in exile, a people who felt they had been punished for their sins, a people who were waiting, hoping and yet too often doubting that life would change course...while it is good to remember that these words are part of the section of Isaiah often called the book of consolation...while it's good to remember this, passages like this also remind us of the timelessness of the Biblical message.

Whether these words came to those who were sitting in exile, pinning their hope on Cyrus, the King of Persia...or whether these words come to us today in the midst of a global pandemic alongside other stresses and struggles of life...in both cases there are important reminders for us.

In both the Biblical passage and the song "Be Not Afraid," which borrows images from this passage, we are given the assurance that God is always with us. Now, it is important to note that the scripture doesn't say "if" but says "when" - not if things are hard, but when things are hard, when life is overwhelming, when the plan doesn't go as you expect (and friends, we surely know what that feels like)...we are reminded that God is present.

It is also important to note that both the scripture and song invite us to respond. While the language of Isaiah is that God has already redeemed the people, already called God's people by name...there is also, if you read on in this chapter and if you listen to the words of the song, an invitation to follow. In Isaiah 43 it is an invitation for the people to gather, to be forgiven, to again become God's people. In the song we hear the words, "Come, follow me, and I will give you rest."

And, let's not forget to also name that there are often troubling things in Biblical passages. And this one is no different. Yes, this one says, "I give Egypt as your

ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.” But perhaps before we get too self-centered and believe that God somehow loves us more than others or will give up others for us, let also us remember stories like the story of Abraham’s first son, Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, who God met in the wilderness and gave a promise to alongside Sarah and Abraham’s son, Isaac. Let us remember that even later in this chapter of Isaiah God calls the nations together as we hear so many other places in scripture. So, we are reminded that God’s love is wide and deep and for all humanity.

I suspect we can agree that when we hear these words from Isaiah, when we sing this beautiful song, when we do that in the good and easy times of life, while we appreciate the sentiment, it is usually less impactful. *But*, when we are scared...when we are lonely...when we are struggling to find meaning in this life that seemed to turn on a dime by the power of pandemic....these words aren’t only a lovely sentiment, but if we can embrace them, if we can take them in, if we can let them speak their truth to the deepest parts of who we are...they might just save us.

Friends, I invite you to let these words in. Sit with them. Live with them. Not only with the words, but with the reality. You are precious in God’s sight...you are honored...God loves you very much.

Amen.