

“Walking through Fire”
January 7, 2007

Isaiah 43:1-3a, 5-7
Luke 3:21-22

The passage from Isaiah we heard a few moments ago is one of my favorite passages in the Bible. It begins with a word of reassurance and belonging. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine.” Not “mine” as in, “You’re mine, and I can do anything I want to do to you,” but “mine” in the sense of being loved, cherished, *protected*.

But then the passage goes on and acknowledges that holy love and care will not prevent us from encountering the pain and struggle and hard work of life:

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.

There is no promise in here that we won’t face raging rivers of one sort or another or that we won’t have to walk through fire. This isn’t a Pollyanna kind of comfort. Isaiah isn’t telling us that, with God at our side, we’ll never be in danger. Instead, we hear that rivers and fire and flame *will* come. It’s not a question of “if,” but “when.” But we also hear that if we welcome God’s presence in the midst of those waters and fires, they can’t destroy us and they can’t destroy God’s loving claim on us. I consider this good news, very good news.

But even though this has been one of my favorite passages for years, over the last week I’ve noticed something in it that leaves me uneasy and skeptical. It’s been there all along, but I hadn’t really seen it before. But even with this belated “discovery,” much of this passage still rings true in my mind and heart. What *still* makes sense to me is that the rivers in human life – the rivers of unexpected or unwelcome change, the rivers of illness or declining health – can’t overwhelm or erase anyone’s identity as one of God’s beloved. It makes sense to me that those disruptive waters cannot stop the flow of grace into our lives. And it still makes sense to me that the fire and flames of anger, violence, and betrayal cannot *consume* us, as long as we seek our rest and identity in God, and not in revenge.

Those parts of what we hear through Isaiah speak the truth to me. But what doesn’t speak the truth to me and what I can’t stand up here and preach is that the destructive fires in our lives and in the world don’t *burn* us. I can’t stand here and claim that those fires don’t burn and don’t leave us in some way scarred for life.

Whether it’s in the life of the child who was abused 50 years ago or 50 minutes ago or the child who will be abused 50 seconds from now, the fire of violence *burns*. Whether it’s in the life of the spouse or partner who lived through domestic violence in the past or who’s living with it this very day, the fires of betrayal *burn*. Whether it’s in the life of an alcoholic or addict who sobered up last year or last week or who is still caught in the hell of addiction, the fires of self-loathing and desperation *burn*. And

whether it's in the life of a parent whose child died far too young years ago or days ago or whose child will die tomorrow, the searing fires of loss *burn*.

Those fires burn, here in this sanctuary, in Sonoma, and throughout the world. They burn, and they eat away at our ability to hear *and believe* these words: "Do not fear. I have called you by name, you are mine." Mine to love, to bless, to cherish; mine to call into a life of faith, service, and love.

And yet, even in the midst of those burning fires, there is something sacred, healthy, and whole that survives within us, although it may be covered with so many scars that it's impossible to see. What survives is a heart longing to hear those words of reassurance and belonging, a heart that can still respond to those sacred words, even if the response is imperceptible at first. This is what I think this morning's passage means when it says the flame "shall not consume you." It will not consume the deepest knowing in your heart, that you are called and claimed and loved by God.

So even though I take issue with Isaiah because there are many fires that *do* burn, badly and deeply, I also *believe* Isaiah and the God for whom he is speaking, when they tell us that the Holy Spirit of life and love stays with us in the midst of those fires and that it can keep us from being *consumed* by their flames. No matter what we've done or what has been done to us, something within us *continues* to know that we are beloved of God. Something always retains the ability to hear those words, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name; you are mine."

Christian discipleship is an invitation to participate in that holy naming and claiming. Just as we are meant to hear and accept that God's loving claim on our lives through Isaiah, we are meant to hear that claim within the story of Jesus' baptism. Luke tells us that a voice from heaven named Jesus as "my son, the beloved." And all the gospels tell us that Jesus taught and tried to live the truth that we are *all* God's beloved. He taught and lived that truth in the midst of the fires of betrayal, violence, and execution. The gospel stories tell us that those fires *burned* Jesus, as he wept for his friend Lazarus, as he prayed in Gethsemane, as he suffered on the cross. Those fires burned him, but they did not consume him. He never denied God's claim on him by responding to violence with violence, to hate with hate, or to ridicule with ridicule.

As we celebrate communion this morning and as we venture throughout our lives, let us join in Jesus' ministry by walking through the fires burning in our lives and our world. And let us remember that, even though we may be burned by those fires, we never have to face the fires alone. Let us remember that the God who walks with us promises never to abandon us.

Amen.

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First Congregational Church of Sonoma, UCC
January 7, 2007