

“Your Boring Cry”

Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Baptism of Our Lord Sunday, January 13, 2019
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At the College Conference at Montreat this January, a group of women from the Swannanoa Women’s Prison came to speak to the college kids. They shared amazingly sad stories undergirded by an even more amazing hope. These women had often been abused and abandoned by their families.

The prison chaplain talking to all of these church kids from around the county active in Westminster Fellowships, UKirks, Presbyterian Student Associations, Baptist Student Unions, and other campus ministry groups told about how a lifer (in prison forever) came to her church with black eyes and broken arms— plural—, but nobody asked how she was. Nobody asked about her health, her bruises, her pain. I guess polite people don’t want to meddle in other people’s business. Had someone dared to ask, a relationship could have been sparked, and that woman’s trajectory could have changed for the better. She’s in prison now.

These women shared their life stories—amazingly sad stories undergirded by an even more amazing hope. By way of violence these women each found themselves on the streets, uneducated, living with so-called boyfriends, repeating the predictable cycle of violence and despair from which they were raised, and finally by way of their own violence to others in prison.

One woman told these wide-eyed college kids that being in prison crushed her spirit. When she felt at the end of her rope, when she was ready to end it all, she talked to a fellow inmate, another long-timer, an older woman who was friendly and seemed centered. She asked the older woman one question. One question.

“Tell me about Jesus.”

* * *

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you,” says the LORD.
“I have called you by name. You are mine.”

These words from scripture stir within our bones hope and joy and comfort.

“When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
the rivers 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.”

And yet.

And yet there are good moral people, including many of our next of kin, who simply do not believe these words. They’d like to, but they read the newspaper and they look at the bad luck of their own lives and they see no proof. These words, to them, are fairy tale words.

The waters shall not overwhelm you? Tell that to the people of Indonesia or Japan or Mexico beach. Tsunami or hurricane have leveled their homes and livelihoods and taken the lives of their family. In Ethiopia, 98,000 people were displaced by the ongoing East African floods beginning ten months ago. *The waters shall not overwhelm you?* Does God not care about these people? Because they, certainly, were overwhelmed.

And, *When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you?* Tell that to the people of Paradise, California. Their town was destroyed by the Camp Fire. Over 8,000 wildfires last year destroyed nearly two million acres. Many of these residents did not walk through the fire; and for many, if they survived, nothing they owned did. Again, our friends might ask, where was God in the midst of that?

We could ask about cycles of poverty in this country. We could ask about what are we doing to stem to tide of domestic violence. We could ask why we don't do more to support great ministries like DREAM House, which makes a difference in the lives of child and youth who know too well the cycles of poverty with our dollars and time and prayer. We could ask why we allow shelters to be overcrowded. We could ask about the privatization of prisons, about prison reform, about the goal of incarcerating such a high percentage of our population.

Likewise, we could and should ask about global warming and other man-made causes of natural disaster.

We could and should ask a lot of questions.

But the mother of these questions is a close variant of this: why do bad things happen to good people? The question was classically posed by Job in the Bible. Why does God allow such despair in the world? If God is for us, why are we so defeated by life's difficulties? Does God really deliver us through the waters? Does God protect us in the fire? Does God really know our name, and does God claim us? Had God forgotten the people washed away in the Indonesian tsunami?

And this question: Is God really our savior?

Ask Jesus.

Jesus suffered mightily. On the cross (in Mark's gospel) he cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He was quoting Psalm 22, which asks exactly the same question; it seems people of faith have *always* been asking that question. *The flood and fire have come. Why have you forsaken me?*

I suspect that's how that woman felt in that North Carolina prison. She felt overwhelmed and forgotten. All alone. Forsaken. And at the end of her rope, almost as an afterthought, she asked the older woman in that prison, "Tell me about Jesus."

And in Jesus she met a man who also had felt forsaken, but had made it through the fire—not without scars, but completely whole. She identified with that man. His suffering to her seemed real, and his deliverance seemed real, too. And he seemed like someone she wanted to get to know better.

Just like Jesus, she had been baptized by fire.

And just like Jesus, she would be delivered.

And he offered to be her savior.

She believes the song they sing in chapel.

*I was there to hear your borning cry,
I'll be there when you are old.
I was there the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold.*

And when the chaplain reads Isaiah 43 where God comforts Israel—*I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight. I love you.*—they're not just empty words for her. She thinks about Jesus and the fires and floods that swallowed him, and those words hold such promise, vibrate with such power, and shine with glory.

She is no longer a woman without hope.

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Long ago, when Jesus stepped into the chilly waters of the River Jordan, he may have had these very words from Isaiah in mind:

“When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
the rivers 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.”

Alleluia.