

## **Fire and water**

Isaiah 43:1-7

January 10, 2016

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

Maybe you're afraid of the unknown.

Maybe you're afraid of the future because it is unknown. Because you don't know what will happen to you or to those you love. Because you can't foresee or forestall any of the calamities that might overtake you. Because bad things do happen and bad things almost certainly will happen ... to you.

Or maybe you're afraid of the stranger because he is unknown. Because he is different from you and you don't know how he thinks or how he feels or what he believes or what he intends. You don't know what motivates him or what he might do ... to you. At the very least, you are afraid he will change your neighborhood, change your culture, change your life, and nothing will be what it was.

Maybe you're afraid of change, any change, because it is unknown. You like your life the way it is, not necessarily because it's good, but because it's familiar and what is familiar feels comfortable and safe.

Or maybe you're afraid of the dark, because it is unknown. Because you don't know what may be lurking in the shadows, what may be waiting -- for you! -- in the dark corners.

What do we do when we're afraid of the unknown? We carry flashlights and put up street lamps and flood the night with artificial light. We pull back, we pull in, we dig in our heels, we build walls, resisting change, keeping strangers out, doing all we can to minimize risk.

And the result is: we stop living. We stop growing. We don't see. We cut ourselves off from the world as it is and from people as they are, missing much of the beauty and wonder of both.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

Maybe you're afraid of being known.

Maybe you're afraid of being found out, of being exposed as the fraud you know yourself to be. You don't want them to know what is really inside you: the lack of confidence, the feelings of inadequacy, the sense of failure, the darkness, the fear, the sin. If they really knew you ... Oh, they mustn't know you!

And so we pull back, we pull in, we build walls, we put on a face, a face we hope people will like and accept. We do our best to keep everybody out, not because we don't want to be known -- because we do, we really do want to be known! -- but because we are afraid.

And the result is: nobody really knows us. Nobody is genuinely close to us. Our inner wounds go unhealed and we lack the capacity, the vulnerability, the honesty, to heal anybody else's wounds.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

The antidote to fear is love. You know that! What do you do when your child is frightened, when your little sister is scared? You hold her. You stroke her hair. You tell her it's going to be all right. Because you are there. Because you are with her.

What do you do when your husband, your father, your grandfather lies on the bed, not far from death? You hold his hand. You kiss his cheek. You tell him you love him.

Do not be afraid! I am with you! You are mine! God holds us. God's love envelops us, shining light on the darkness of our fear, calming us, reassuring us, because he is there, because he is with us.

And knowing we are loved by God empowers us to love: to love the future, embracing its possibilities ... to love the stranger, knowing we may make a new friend ... to love the dark, because it reveals secrets we miss in the daytime ... and even to love ourselves, to live boldly the life we have because God has given it, knowing we matter because we matter to God, and knowing that all our failures, all our weaknesses, all our sins will be forgiven.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

That's the sermon I was going to preach, before I went back and read the text again!

*Israel, the Lord who created you says,  
"Do not be afraid -- I will save you.  
I have called you by name -- you are mine.  
When you pass through deep waters,  
I will be with you;  
your troubles will not overwhelm you.  
When you pass through fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the hard trials that come will not hurt you."*

Fire and water! This is not talking about fear of the things that lurk in the shadows, in the dark corners of our imagination, forbidding things that might be. This is talking about the very real terror of things that are: waters, deep and raging, that threaten to drown us ... fire, hot and raging, that threatens to incinerate us.

*When you pass through deep waters ...*

Troubles, deep troubles, troubles that flood your life and threaten to overwhelm your soul.

Disease, a chronic disease, that leaves your body and spirit spent, that makes just making it through one more day a monumental task, that saps your joy and leaves you anxious about tomorrow.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

Poverty, grinding poverty, that means every ounce of energy, every minute of every day, is all about doing whatever you can to survive, that means tomorrow you may not eat or your child may not eat, that means tomorrow you may not have a bed to lie in or your child may not have a bed to lie in, that means tomorrow you may die or your child may die.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

The word of the Lord is addressed to Israel, to the people of Israel who at that time were homeless, refugees. They were refugees! Strangers in a strange land, not knowing the language, not knowing the customs, not knowing the gods, having to make a life not of their own choosing, in a place not of their own choosing, not knowing if they will ever go home.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

*When you pass through fire ...*

The fire of trials, hard trials, trials that do not merely test your strength and your resolve, but trials that push your to the brink of annihilation.

War, being caught in the crossfire of a fight you did not make, dreading every dawn, dreading every sunset, each sudden sound, each sudden movement a harbinger of death.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

Discrimination, extreme prejudice, being judged, being shunned, being abused, because of your skin color, because of your gender, because of your sexual orientation, because of your religion.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

It's not that the Lord will not be with us at the place of our fears, but that most of us don't know what fear is. God's love, God's tireless and boundless love, is the antidote to fear, but God's love is about more, so much more, than merely easing our anxieties. God's love is about bringing good news to the poor, setting free the oppressed, giving sight to the blind, proclaiming liberty, not to those who already enjoy it, but to those who don't, to captives.

God's love is not about protecting us from this world, but about saving us, saving all people, from peril, by transforming this world.

*Do not be afraid. I am with you. You are mine.*

We are his. We belong to God. God is with us. So do not be afraid! Do not be afraid of the future. Do not be afraid of the stranger. Do not be afraid of the dark.

And do not be afraid of fire or water. You will not be overwhelmed. You will not be hurt. You -- we, the world of people God loves -- will be saved.