

Right now!

Isaiah 43:14-21

October 15, 2006

It's October 15, 2006. It's 11:10 am Central Daylight Time. You are seated in the sanctuary of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Waterloo, Iowa.

How do you feel ... right now? How do you feel about yourself, right now? How do you feel about your life, right now? Are you satisfied? Are you content? Are you at peace with yourself? Are you at peace with God? Are you confident that God is present with you, watching over you, providing for you, blessing you, right now?

If time were to freeze at this one moment, could you say that your life is good? Could you say that your life brings you joy ... right now?

I want to suggest to you that this is what faith is, or what faith does. Faith in God allows us to live with gratitude and confidence, with full satisfaction and great expectation, at any given moment, whatever the circumstances, at this very moment, right now!

The author of the letter to the Hebrews put it this way:

To have faith is to be sure of the things we hope for, to be certain of the things we cannot see ...

As believers, we walk by faith, not by sight, which is to say that faith is another way of seeing. Faith is another way of looking at our present circumstances, whatever they are, and seeing not only what is apparently true, but what is true -- that God is here, that God is alive and well and involved here.

Faith is another way of seeing that allows us to take decisive action -- to leave home for a promised land, to walk the path of obedience regardless of where it may take us, to love our enemies, to forgive our debtors, to choose peace, to choose to make peace -- to take decisive action and to celebrate the goodness of life as it is, right now.

The opposite of faith is not doubt, but despair. The opposite of faith is not doubt because doubt is a rational judgment applied to a certain set of observations. But faith is not a rational judgment. I do not consider the facts and decide if there is enough evidence to warrant faith, or if not, that I should remain in doubt. Faith is a choice, a choice to take God at his word, to trust what God says and to put trust in what God will do. Faith is a moral choice, a moral choice because it sets the direction for my behavior and my attitudes and my ambitions.

The opposite of faith is despair, refusing to take God at his word, choosing not to trust what God says or to put trust in what God will do. Despair is a choice, a moral choice, because it sets the direction for my behavior and my attitudes and my ambitions. To be in despair is to give up on the things we hope for, to disbelieve the things we cannot see. To be in despair is to resign ourselves to fear and to loneliness and to loss, to hopelessness, to defeat, and to death.

This is just what the Jewish exiles in Babylon were doing. And so Isaiah, the Lord's prophet, proclaims God's message to them, hoping to rattle their cages, to wake them up, to rouse their faith!

*I am the Lord, your holy God;
I created you, and I am your king!*

Things were very bad in Babylon. The Jewish exiles had been uprooted from their homeland, forcibly resettled in the land of their oppressors. They had lost their homes and their livelihoods, their way of life and their place for worship, their dignity and their hope. What options did they have left? What choices did they have?

They could choose to go along to get along. They could adopt the customs and gods of their new home. They could take the side of the winning team, join forces with their conquerors, and leave behind their own heritage, their own identity, their own God. And many of them did.

Or they could console themselves by remembering what they once were, their bodies still in Babylon, but their souls far, far away. They could remember their homes, their fields, their animals. They could remember the splendors of the Temple of the Lord before it was ransacked. They could remember the days of David the King, some five centuries before their own time, when the rest of the known world feared their armies! They could remember the days of Moses the Lawgiver, retelling the stories of the time when God chose them and saved them, when God humbled the mighty Egyptian army, set them free from slavery in Egypt, and brought them to the land of promise. And, undoubtedly, many of them did.

But both of these choices -- accommodation or reminiscence -- are forms of despair. Accommodation is denial, a denial of ourselves and a denial of God's intentions for us. Living in the past is escape. Denial and escape are acts of despair, resigning ourselves to loss, giving up our identity, giving up on the present.

*But the Lord says,
Do not cling to events of the past
or dwell on what happened long ago.
Watch for the new thing I am going to do ...*

You remember when I saved your ancestors by leading Egypt's mighty army to destruction? I did that for them, but now watch what I will do for you!

*To save you, I will send an army
against Babylon;
I will break down the city gates ...
Watch for the new thing I am going to do!*

Do not cling to events of the past. But, oh, that is so easy to do!

Do you remember when we had ninety vocalists from seven or eight different churches singing *River in Judea* with John Leavitt himself pounding on the keyboard?

Do you remember when a dedicated group of folks calling themselves the childcare committee worked together for two years -- two years! -- carefully researching, carefully planning, ultimately succeeding in establishing a first rate child care facility here at First Congregational UCC?

Do you remember when we started the Wednesday night GROW program and a hundred adults and children shared a meal, sang songs, and did Bible study?

Do you remember when Rabbi Kushner was here as a guest lecturer and we drew people from all over the city into our church sanctuary?

Do you remember when this church numbered over a thousand members, and there were Sunday school rooms all over the building, and the sanctuary was filled on a Sunday morning?

Do you remember when two women and four men took a stand on principle and boldly declared their opposition to any compromise on the issue of slavery, covenanting together to found this church?

Do you remember when our church ancestors came from across the ocean, leaving behind a land of oppression for this new land, a land of promise, a land of freedom, forming new towns and new churches and new schools, helping to form a new nation dedicated to the principles of liberty and equality and freedom of conscience?

Do not cling to events of the past!

But those were some of our best moments, those were some of our best days ...

*Do not cling to events of the past
or dwell on what happened long ago.
Watch for the new thing I am going to do.
It is happening already -- you can see it now!*

There it is . This is what we need to hear: *You can see it now!* Faith sees what God is doing ... right now! To live in a past we can never reclaim or to live for the promise of a distant future we will never see is to live in despair. Genuine faith, living faith, faith that makes a difference, faith that transforms lives, faith that transforms the world, sees God here and sees what God is doing now.

It is not at all hard and not at all threatening -- and not at all useful -- to talk about what God used to do or what God will do some day. It is hard, it may be threatening, it takes courage, it takes real faith, to talk about what God is doing right now, but that is the only faith that matters.

God has blessed us richly in the past -- thanks be to God! And God has promised us a glorious future -- thanks be to God! But to live in either is to live in despair.

If time were to freeze at this one moment, could we say that our life is good? Could we say that our life brings us joy? Could we say that we see God doing good things in us and for us and through us ... right now?