

“God Always Calls Us By Name”

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

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We live in a fearful world. A philosopher, Bertrand Russell, described that “fear is the main source of superstition, and one of the main sources of cruelty. To conquer fear is the beginning of wisdom.” But fear is so real and powerful to overwhelm us. A New York Times July 2012 article dealt with anxiety issues in our country. The report shows us that nearly one in five Americans suffer from anxiety. For many, it is not a disorder, but a part of human condition. What in the world is going on?

On Christmas Eve in 2012, four innocent firefighters were shot in the city of Webster, New York, when they received a call to put out a car fire. Two were killed, and the other two were fatally wounded after gunfire. According to the report, firefighters were called to come to a burning house, but it was a trap. The killer intentionally burned his car and house and waited for firefighters. He killed himself after he shot those innocent firemen. Police officers didn’t know why this happened but they guessed that the mental health issue must be involved. In 2001, the 9/11 Experience shook our belief that our nation is safe from fear of terrorism, but the massacre of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut was another challenge to remind us that there is no safe place in this world. Where is the safest place for our children in our society? One of my wife’s friends is preparing to take a special license exam in order to carry guns in her car. She told me that she has guns in her house but she wants to buy another gun in her car to protect herself. Somehow, I understand her fear, because my wife experienced a robbery which happened five years ago on our driveway. The detective told us that there were similar robberies that were happening to women in our neighborhood. The police said that young men were intentionally targeting women at the shopping mall. They followed them and waited for them to get out of their cars at their homes. Do you feel we live in a safe place?

Fear is not only a modern concern but was also a concern in ancient Israel as our Old Testament reading tells us. Think about the tone of the Old Testament reading again. The prophet Isaiah delivered God’s message to the Israelites with comfort and hope. But the situation of Israel was still not safe nor hopeful. By the intrusion of Babylon, the city of Jerusalem was destroyed and left in ruins. Many Israelites were taken to Babylon as war prisoners and they wept by the rivers of Babylon for many years. In our reading of Isaiah, it shows us a period

of power shift from Babylon to Persia. Israel was caught between two powers. Israel was a colony of Babylon, but now faced Persian conquest. People were fearful and anxious in this transitional chaos. Are you able to feel for the Israelites' anxiety and fear in such circumstances? Don't assume that the Israelites always felt safe in their faith, but real life's situations were harsh and bitter. The prophet Isaiah conveyed these words, "Do not fear for I am with you, 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."

I am not only talking about our external fear or sense of security, but I am also talking about our deeper fear inside us. While I was doing this sermon, I had many thoughts about the meaning of life struggles. Within our own congregation, we are struggling with health concerns, financial challenges, job security and uncertain future. Some of us are fighting depression, loneliness, broken relationships and grief issues over the loss of loved ones. While I was working on my sermon, I talked to Youngjae and asked her about her meaning of life. She was surprised. Then we talked about how our life is good, but on the other hand, life is difficult and challenging. We were raised around Buddhism and it makes me wonder how Buddhists believe about the meaning of life. From his castle, Buddha observed his people's lives. He knew that there are common things in all people's lives: birth, sickness, suffering and death. No one is free from these cycles. The purpose of Buddhism practice is to find "pleasure" and "happiness" in the ocean of "suffering".

Actually, Buddhists don't practice a belief in God. Buddhism highlights 'internal self-salvation', but we believe in God. Our Christianity has very unique and special understanding of God compared to other religions in our world. Isaiah 43:1 has a key for us: "I have called you by name, you are mine." Our God is not only creator, nor is he merely watching over us on a throne in heaven. But our God is personal. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us that it feels like a relationship between mother and her baby. He also says, "thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I redeemed you. Because you are precious in my sight and honored and I love you, I will bring you back home. Do not fear, for I am with you."

Our New Testament reading shows us the meaning of Jesus' baptism. Baptism is a symbolic ritual to belong to God's family. The point of Jesus' baptism is simple and clear. It describes his personal relationship with God. God told him, "You are my Son, the beloved." Do you remember your baptism? Or if you were too young, did your parents tell you more later about their experience?

I was baptized twice: one infant baptism and the other was when I was a middle school student during confirmation class. However, in Christianity, when you are baptized, it is for your whole life. In our Methodism, it is true, but in some other circumstances, you may be asked to be baptized again. In my case, however, when I was baptized again as an adult, when the minister called my name, I felt as if God had called me. I belonged to God. The ritual of baptism is the reminder that we are God's and God is always with us and calls each of us by name.

But we should remember this: Our God doesn't guarantee us 'no pain', 'no suffering' nor 'permanent bliss of heaven' during our life journey. As the prophet Isaiah knew, faith does not protect us from the realities of life. It is sad but we pass through life's hardships and pains. Like the Israelites in ancient times, we may face fearful moments. We may walk through the fire, be placed in rough waters, or huge waves that overwhelm us. Sometimes, we might be put between a rock and a hard place, but God assured us that we are not in a dead end because our God will be with us. We know that God knows our names, God knows our hearts and our tears because God created us, formed us, and redeemed us. God is always our good parent. Good parents may not protect us from all life's struggles and challenges, but he still gives us comfort and strength by calling our names. God will never forget us, will never leave us alone, and will be with us at every turn in our life situations. This is our faith statement and this is what we believe in our God. Amen.