

# Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

Sunday after Epiphany: January 12, 2025

The Journey - Fear Not

Rev. Dr. Lois Williams

Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this First Sunday after Epiphany. Last Sunday we heard the story of the magi finding the baby Jesus and Mary and then leaving by another route. And so, we talked about our own journey to find the Christ child. To find and have a relationship with God that brings us love, compassion, and peace. I even brought up the idea that you may know God loves you, but do you feel like God likes you? To begin our journey, we need to understand where our scriptures might be leading us. So, I begin with a focus on our Old Testament lesson Isaiah 43.

At the time these prophetic words were written, God had already been on a long journey with God's people. There had been lots of ups and downs, challenges and uncertainties. God's people had evolved over many centuries, from a small family to a large clan of slaves in Egypt. They had emerged from slavery to wandering in the wilderness, to settling in a land. They had faced threats and battled enemies. They had grown and become unified - with a king, a culture and a temple.

All of that history leads us to the time of this passage, when there has been another major upheaval - one of the most tumultuous events in the whole story of the Bible. By the time we get to Isaiah 43 (around 540 BC) there is no more king, their culture is in peril, no more temple, and the land promised by God has been overrun by a stronger kingdom, the Babylonians.

So, imagine the scene: the king has been sacked, the temple - a sign of God's presence and care - has been destroyed. The people have no sense of what the future holds because everything they hoped for and depended on was gone. Worse than that, many of the people - God's beloved people - have been carried

away to Babylon - captives to a conquering power, exiled away from everything they thought was solid and sacred. Psalm 137 is connected to these events; it is another passage from this same era, giving a glimpse of God's people as they "sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept."

Whenever we hear the words "thus says the Lord" we should pay attention. Then just as quickly as we are brought to attention we have that all-important imperative: "Do not fear." Lots of times in Scripture (and this is hard to believe, but true) there are 365 times in the Bible (one for every day of the year), when we are told - "do not fear." In many of those scenarios, the word comes to an individual. You may recall in our Advent stories leading up to Christmas we heard this phrase. "Do not fear!"

That was the message to Zechariah, the priest, whose wife Elizabeth was barren, but would have a child, John (Jesus' cousin.) It was also the message to the young maiden, Mary, when she learned she was with child with the Messiah. It was the message to Joseph - "do not fear" - in a dream - that Mary would bear a son. It was what the angel told the shepherds in the field, when they heard the news of great joy and did not know what to make of it. Those are beautiful and important messages - but they are specific words in specific situations.

This message - spoken by the prophet Isaiah - is not to a person but to a people! A people in crisis! It is an over-arching message that intends to comfort and encourage a people in very dire straits. Imperatives like - "Do not fear!" - only make sense if there is some grounding for those words. Imperatives only make sense if they are backed with reasoning, sustenance, and have a foundation. If we are going to let go of our fear, we have to have something else to know, something to lean into, something to depend on.

If we are going to move away from fear, and have faith and hope, there has to be something else going on, something else to be true, something else to shape our lives. And in the Bible, the prophet Isaiah has been dishing out this news for

several chapters now. He has been presenting new truths to God's people to change their frame of mind, to increase hope, to give light. This prophet - ever since chapter 40 - keeps speaking about God and what is true for God's people because God is always at work, even when they don't see it.

Here is the groundwork for the imperative not to fear. Here is the foundation, the reason for the people not to be overwhelmed, no matter what life looks like. Isaiah says, "thus says the Lord - do not fear, I have redeemed you." And you can just feel the visceral sigh of relief. Even though the world feels like it is crashing down around us, God has redeemed us: redeemed you and redeemed me.

The people of Isaiah's time needed to hear both those phrases, "fear not", and "I have redeemed you", just as we need to hear them today. I would not be using hyperbole to explain that at this time the world is on fire. To say that the earth is quaking, there is enormous flooding and winds, to say that violence is beginning to be the norm. Yet through these ancient scriptures, God is reminding us that his beloved people have been through tough times before and he has heard them.

We are on a journey and God reminds us, "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." God is with us in this life and the next, do not fear. For the Hebrew people they had to hear their prophet. However for us today, we are not just hoping for redemption, we have received redemption because on the day of Jesus' baptism, heaven and earth connected. God is now incarnate and understands.

What is that saying? "From our lips to God's ears." John was preparing the way, and Jesus was that fulfillment. Do not fear, God is with us as he has been before. May all those who need to hear these words in a world full of disaster and uncertainty, open their ears, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." Amen