

Sunday, January 13, 2013: Isaiah 43:1-7; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

In the Lectionary
January 9, 2013

I was ordained last February, and since then I've been invited to preach at more than a dozen churches as a supply preacher. It's always an adventure to pack up my minister's gown and stole and drive to a new church. Last summer I found myself preaching at the opening worship service for a local fair.

More recently, I used my GPS system to locate a church on the mountainous Pennsylvania and West Virginia border. I traveled literally over the river and through the woods (and under the large conveyor belt of an immense coal mine) to an idyllic valley and pulled up in front of a small clapboard church with a white steeple.

Early in the worship service, I discovered that this congregation believed in heartfelt prayer. It seemed as though every person who had come that morning brought with him or her a joy or concern to share during the church's prayer time. As a result, the prayer time took a prominent position in the service. People mentioned illnesses, economic uncertainty, injuries, academic anxiety and family challenges. Some described athletic victories, medical healings or improvements and the enjoyment of church activities and charitable endeavors. The responses that people in this closely knit group shared with each other indicated their mutual trust and their confident hope. A church elder took note of each prayer request and then poetically wove them together in a congregational prayer that stressed the comfort God provides amidst the hard edges and high points of human existence.

The prophet Isaiah promises similar comfort in Isaiah 43:1–7. Using remarkable language to express God's promises, Isaiah reminds Israel that God will be with them and that anyone who believes these amazing declarations is "precious in my sight." "I have called you by name, you are mine." When you pass through the waters and through the rivers you shall not be overwhelmed, and "when you walk through fire you shall not be burned." Premised upon these promises, the text reaches its crescendo with the divine proclamation, "Do not fear, for I am with you," which Isaiah promises to everyone "called by my name" whom God created, formed and made "for my glory."

Isaiah's promise of God's presence and comfort is amplified in Luke's description of Jesus' baptism, when the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. Just as Isaiah reported God's promise—"I love you"—Luke records God's exclamation to Jesus, when the voice came from heaven. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The more we yearn for divine affirmation and the love of our ultimate, heavenly Father, the more we are able to comprehend the significance of these messages from both Isaiah and Luke. People who are Christ's followers share in his affirmation from on high. As Augustine of Hippo recognized, we have a God-sized void within us. Augustine famously wrote in his *Confessions*, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

We're reminded of the reality of God's ongoing presence as the story in Luke continues. Hearing that Samaria had accepted the word of God, the apostles in Jerusalem responded by sending Peter and John to pray that the Samaritans would receive the Holy Spirit. This is exactly what happened, the text tells us, when Peter and John laid their hands on them.

In our post-Enlightenment, postmodern world, descriptions of the Holy Spirit strike some as odd. The heavens opening in Jesus' baptism, along with the rest of the biblical story, reveal what Karl Barth called a "strange new world." As Barth wrote, "The whole Bible authoritatively announces that God must be all in all; and the events of the Bible are the beginning, the glorious beginning of a new world." The story of faith, which the Bible declares, affirms that somehow the "voice from heaven" gets through our own empirical limitations.

God's message of love penetrates our hearts even in the face of our own shortcomings. Before we read about Isaiah sharing declarations of divine favor toward Israel, or God sharing divine favor toward Jesus, we read about the concept of divine judgment. Before we hear God's promises of comfort in Isaiah, we hear about Israel's alienation from God as a result of its sins. In Luke, we hear about John the Baptist's ministry—and sermons of the classic "turn or burn" variety. Luke reported John's sense of divine judgment with the metaphor-laded text, "his winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Whether it is our own failures or illnesses, our economic uncertainty, academic struggles, family tensions or life's precious moments of joy, God is with us, giving us comfort through it all. This comfort from a God who "calls us by name" allows us to pass through life's tempestuous waters and raging fires unharmed. With this amazing promise, there is no basis for fear.

One way in which we'll find God communicating that love to us is in the shared prayers of faith communities.