

**GOD SAVES**

Isaiah 35:1-10

Today our theme is joy and salvation. Even though we are known as the frozen chosen, we are more or less comfortable with the idea of joy. But salvation is one of those sticky topics for us. Don't you love it when people come to you and ask you if you are saved? It is kind of scary. What if I am not saved? What if I am going to hell? What if being Presbyterian is not good enough to go to heaven? What happens to my family members who don't go to church? Should I be working on them to make sure that they are saved? The joke is told about a man who arrives at the gates of heaven. St. Peter asks, "Religion?" The man says, "Presbyterian." St. Peter looks down his list, and says, "Go to room 24, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." Another man arrives at the gates of heaven. "Religion?" "Methodist." "Go to room 18, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." A third man arrives at the gates. "Religion?" "Jewish." "Go to room 11, but be very quiet as you pass room 8." The man says, "I can understand there being different rooms for different religions, but why must I be quiet when I pass room 8?" St. Peter tells him, "Well the Baptists are in room 8, and they think they're the only ones in heaven."

Unfortunately, we tend to think of salvation in those limited terms. I have a friend who once told me if faith is about going to heaven, then it is only a fire insurance. (Beth brings in boxes) What do we have here? Oh special delivery items from the prophet Isaiah. That's what I get for talking about people behind their back, especially when they are dead! So, what do we have here? Well, this box says on it, "Fear and pain, open with caution." I think I will start with this one. We have here several items: A menorah, a map, and the shield of David. This is odd, what do they have in common. Oh, there is a note here. Let me read it and see if it explains how these items connect with pain and fear.

"Dear Roula and the people of First Presbyterian Church of Batavia, Greetings to all of you! None of you have met me personally, but you have read my words many times in worship. I am the prophet Isaiah. I lived a long time ago in what you know now as ancient Israel. I won't bore you with my life story but I thought I should tell you about some things from the experience of my people that might help you in your faith. I have sent you, in this box, some of the things that became symbols of our pain and fears. The menorah is a seven branched candle holder lit by olive oil in the Temple in Jerusalem. It used to symbolize the burning bush as seen by Moses on Mount Sinai. But after the exile, when we had to leave our home country, this became a symbol of our pain and fear of losing the temple in Jerusalem. It became a reminder of what we have lost. Every time we lit it, many people felt that God abandoned us. The map is a reminder of our homeland, the Promised Land with which God blessed us, but we lost it. The Shield of David reminded us of the glories of having our own nation and being a people together. But in the exile this became a symbol of our pain of losing our nation and being humiliated by other nations. Many of my people became controlled by their fears of the pain of the past. My hope is that you will look at these symbols and think about your own fears. These fears can be legitimate because they come from your experiences of pain. Yet, I hope that you will be able to name your fears in order to ask God to heal them. They will rob you of the joy of God's salvation. Now you may open the second box."

This box is called salvation, "open with joy." Ok, we have here a prayer shawl, a water bowl, and a scroll. I wonder what all of this means? Oh, here is another note. "Well, now that you have opened this box, you see the prayer shawl, water bowl and scroll. These are symbols of our Hebrew faith. Yet, during the exile these symbols were reminders to us that God's love and salvation were with us everywhere we went and any time. The prayer shawl is worn by many people to remind them of God's presence wrapped around them. The water bowl is used for washing hands before Sabbath rest. The scroll is used anywhere people are gathered to worship, not just in the temple in Jerusalem. I preached to my people visions of hope during exile to invite them to let go of their fears and be open to what God was doing to save them while they were in exile. I hope that as people of faith you will be able to accept God's salvation and healing in your life right now because you are special to God and are loved beyond measure. Blessings to you, my friends!"

Wow! There is a lot for us to consider as we look at Isaiah's words and these symbols. Pain and fear are part of our human experience. We learn through our painful experiences to be afraid of the things that might harm us. When children burn their fingers the first time, they learn quickly not to touch hot objects. So fear has a good place in our lives for those basic instincts to protect us. Yet, beyond that basic level of protection, most

of our fears trap us and limit our ability to receive and give love. Fear restricts us from enjoying the freedom of new adventures. Fear holds us back in our past experiences of pain instead of being open to God's new possibilities. Fear makes us react in controlling ways towards anyone who might trigger any of our pain experiences or fears. Fear deprives us from fully enjoying life. It robs us of the joy that God puts in our hearts. Father Richard Rohr once said that "pain that is not transformed is transmitted." So what should we do about our fears? Should we just give up? Are we destined to be miserable? I think it is important to focus on the second box that Isaiah sent us. It is essential to know that God saves us right here and now. The Hebrew word for salvation means liberation, making space so that we can be liberated from distress and danger. It is about our sense of wholeness and the world's wholeness. It is essential to remember that God saves us, creating this kind of spaciousness in our hearts to liberate us from our past experiences of pain that hold us hostage to fear.

The last three weeks I have talked to you about our emotional programs for happiness as defined by Father Thomas Keating under the three categories of power/control, affection/esteem, and security. Our need for security as an emotional program for happiness is based in our fears of what might happen or of what has happened to us. Once we have been hurt, it is hard to let go of our fear around it. Our primitive or reptilian brain does not want to let go of that fear because we might get hurt again. Yet, our fears and our search for security end up hurting us more. Life is unpredictable. Life is fragile. Security is only an illusion. Yet, 99% of our fears never materialize. Even when they do, worrying about them does not change anything. Pay attention to the messages of fears that surround us from TV to personal stories. Stories about bad things happening to people are more juicy because they play into our emotional program for security and fear.

I invite you during the season of Advent to name your fears and to bring them before God for healing. Maybe your fears are about loss of health, loss of a loved one, relationship pain, job insecurity, national security, terrorism, immigration, etc. Whatever your fears might be, I invite you to take the time to claim the words of Isaiah for yourself about letting go of fear and allowing God to save you. Salvation is not about a distant future. Salvation is offered to all of us right here and now. Our work is to receive it. This is hard work and it takes a lot of practice.

In his book, "Hidden Wholeness" Parker Palmer tells the story of the healing that happens when people are given the space to heal. He has done that through creating circles of trust. He says, "a circle of trust is a group of people who know how to sit quietly in the woods with each other and wait for the shy soul to show up." In one of his circles, there was a woman by the name of Janet who was a white middle school teacher. She sat through the first retreat in silence looking angry and distracted. The circle allowed her the space to be without asking her questions. At the start of the second retreat, Janet shared her grievances about having a terrible time in her classroom blaming it all on the students who were black. But no one invaded Janet by challenging her about racism or evaded her by pretending she was not there- despite the fact that there were several teachers in the circle, black and white, who must have been deeply upset about what their colleague was saying. Everyone continued to wait for Janet's soul. Janet struggled with her demons during the second and third retreats. Then, at the fourth retreat, something remarkable happened. Speaking through tears, Janet told the group that after the last retreat, she had become appalled at what she had heard herself saying. She had resolved to build a better relationship with her most difficult student and had learned things about his life that turned some of her anger to compassion. Her classroom troubles had diminished as she acted on the insight that a big part of the problem came from inside of her. Janet's transformation was deep and abiding because it came from within, made possible by a community that trusted her inner teacher and the salvation that God transformed her pain and fear into joy. May we allow the Spirit of God to transform our fears and pains so that we may receive the joy of God's salvation. Amen.