

January 10, 2010
The Federated Church of Hyannis
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IN JUDGMENT AND IN PROMISE

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Once we got a call from one son while the other one was visiting. The son on the phone said, “Go over and slap my brother. Say it is from me and he knows what it is for.” I didn’t do that because our sons are rather large and I could be seriously injured. But behind the humor is a truth, that we all have this nagging feeling of guilt because we are guilty, because we know we have fallen short. Sometimes we blame ourselves or sometimes we find others to blame as a way of absolving ourselves. But we know something is wrong and our efforts to name it fall short.

When we try to analyze the human condition primarily by finding fault in ourselves and others it is mostly an exercise in frustration. Even if we can actually name the true source of the problem all we have done is to name the source of the problem. Unless we understand who we are and whose we are, unless we can discern the great God who created us and loves and cares for us, it is like a board game with no end because we just keep moving the blame around the board from one person to another.

We are at a time in this nation of declining church attendance. While the most significant moment in our nation’s history in the past decade – 9/11 – brought a flood of people into the church, the flood subsided and now attendance at worship is actually lower than before 9/11. And we in New England, the successors to those Puritans who came here for freedom to practice their faith, have come to lead the nation in freedom from religious involvement. Unlike the ancient Jews who were sent into exile, mostly today in America folks have sent themselves into exile from God.

The unfolding drama of the Bible is about our sin and God’s grace. Sin is not an invention of the modern age. The downfall of humanity did not begin when prayer was taken out of public schools. Sin was not brought across the border by illegal aliens. Honestly, it is not the fault of the Democrats. It is not the fault of the Republicans. It is not the Libertarians or vegetarians or

Rotarians. As much fun as it is to find someone else to blame the fall came long ago, back in Genesis 2.

The salvation of humanity did not begin with the last election. The salvation of humanity will not come in the next election. Salvation is not tied to any election. Salvation will not come through modern technology. Redemption is not going to happen if prayer is restored to public schools. It will not be imported from elsewhere. We will not be led into the kingdom of God in all its fullness by the Republicans or Democrats of the town band. It will not come from any political party or social organization. It comes only from the Lord God Almighty who judges us and who alone redeems us.

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Dale Carnegie instructed many in how to win friends and influence people. One of his cardinal rules is to call people by name. The names we are given carry a tremendous influence throughout our lives. This reminds me of a nineteenth-century governor of Texas, James S. “Big Jim” Hogg. He named his baby girl Ima. He did not discover the significance of this choice until days later, when he received a copy of her birth certificate, which read “Ima Hogg.” Perhaps he named his next daughter “Ura.”

Many celebrities have been pressured into changing their original names. In earlier days, their studios laid down an ultimatum: no name change meant no movie contract. Leonard Slye thus became cowboy Roy Rogers, while Betty Joan Perske changed her name to Lauren Bacall. We knew Frances Gumm as Judy Garland. Actor Kirk Douglas was originally Issur Danielvitch Demsky and singer John Denver began life as Henry John Deutschendorf, Jr.

Isaiah said that God knows who we truly are. He calls us each by our name. In first century Palestine there came this prophet named John in the wilderness calling people to repent and be baptized. People were asking if John was the one come to save them. He was saying things that drew crowds and he stood up to the principalities and powers of first century Israel.

Then again John got his head lobbed off for his preaching and I can understand that. He made a point of insulting the most prominent people who came out to hear him by identifying them for the sinners they were and calling them a brood of vipers. He said they were worthless refuse good only to be thrown on the trash heap and burned. He certainly set the

standard for how to preach. There was a problem in how some received his words but the words are good: repent and be baptized.

Water is a metaphor for chaos as it was at the time of creation. Water can be frightening. It can be deadly. There were thousands of people left homeless this week by a tsunami. Many are still homeless from the effects of Hurricane Katrina. In baptism there is a kind of death, of being immersed where life cannot exist. And so when we rise we rise to new life in Christ. Passing through the waters we die to who we were and rise to who we are to become. When we pass through the waters of baptism, God will be with us; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm us. It will not kill us but will cleanse us.

Bob Beasley belongs to a Baptist Church in Canada, a church that follows the Baptist tradition of baptizing by immersion. Returning home from church one Sunday, his little girl asked, "Daddy, why did the pastor push that guy under the water?" Bob's wife tried to answer her question, but the little girl, named Rena, just wouldn't be satisfied. Later that night Bob and his wife tried to provide an answer from a Baptist perspective that a child's mind could comprehend.

They talked about sin and told Rena that when people decide to live for Jesus and to "be good," they are baptized. They explained that water symbolizes that Jesus washes people from sin; when they come out of the water "clean," it means they are going to try to be "good" from then on. Rena thought about this for a moment and responded, "Why didn't the Preacher just spank him?" What would be wrong with that? Spanking is a form of punishment and baptism is a sign of grace, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

In our baptisms the God who continually brings us back calls us by our name and claims us as his own and we become God's own child. We no longer belong to the world but we belong to God, and the promise is that nothing can snatch us out of the loving hand of God who has claimed us.

It is like the message sent to the people of Israel by the prophet Isaiah that the judgment of God, which scattered them into exile, has ended. The time of judgment was over. The time of redemption had come. If we seek redemption we must also acknowledge the judgment. We only wash what is dirty. And so we baptize to acknowledge God washing away our sins, our

death is symbolized in going below the water and our rising with Christ. And so acknowledging where our life has gone astray, where we have fallen short, in our baptism we can rise with Christ and hear, “You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased.” The water of our baptism symbolizes that we too are God’s beloved.

I will end with this story of a blessed affirmation. Fred Craddock, for many years a teacher of preachers, was vacationing in the Smokey Mountains area of Tennessee. He and his wife had found a lovely restaurant at a place called the Black Bear Inn. Craddock writes: “We were seated there looking out at the mountains when this old man, with shocking white hair, a Carl Sandburg-looking person came over and spoke to us.

He said, “You’re on vacation?” We said, “Yes,” and he just kept right on talking. “What do you do?” he asked. Well, I was thinking, Craddock noted, that it was none of his business, but I let out that I was a minister. Then he said, “Oh, a minister, well I’ve got a story for you.” He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Won’t you have a seat,” Craddock added. (He found out later that the man was eighty years old and a former governor of Tennessee.) He said, “I was born back here in these mountains and when I was growing up I attended Laurel Springs Church. My mother had never been married and as you might expect in those days, I was embarrassed about that. At school I would hide in the weeds by a nearby river and eat my lunch alone because the other children were very cruel. And when I went to town with my courageous mother I would see the way people looked at me trying to guess who my daddy was.

“The preacher fascinated me, but at the same time he scared me. He had a long beard, a rough-hewn face, a deep voice, but I sure liked to hear him preach. But I didn’t think I was welcome at church so I would go just for the sermon. And as soon as the sermon was over, I would rush out so nobody would say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing here in church.’

“One day though,” the old man continued, “I was trying to get out but some people had already got in the aisle so I had to remain. I was waiting, getting in a cold sweat, when all of a sudden I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I looked out of the corner of my eye and realized it was the face of the preacher. And I was scared to death.

“The preacher looked at me. He didn’t say a word, he just looked at me, and then he said, ‘Well boy, you’re a child of...’ and he paused, and I knew he was going to try to guess not who my mother was but who my father was. The preacher said, ‘You’re a child of...um. Why, you’re a child of God! I see a striking resemblance, boy!’ He swatted me on the bottom and said, ‘Go, claim your inheritance.’”

In baptism we find our affirmation. That is where we find strength for the struggle, courage for the crises, and hope for the future. We are part of God’s family, each of us God’s own child, never alone, and nothing can separate us from that love of God in Christ Jesus all the days of our lives.

Is there any greater need we have than to know we are loved? In spite of what we have thought and done, in spite of what people may have said about us and how we have been treated to know that we are God’s beloved and God is pleased with us.

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

Come, O Holy Spirit, come!
 Come like Holy Fire and burn with us.
 Come like Holy Wind and cleanse us.
 Come like Holy Light and lead us.
 Come as Holy Truth and teach us.
 Come as Holy Love and enfold us.
 Come as Holy Power and enable us.
 Come as Abundant Life and Fill us, Convert us, Consecrate us,
 Until we are wholly thine.
 Come, Holy Spirit, Come!