

Baptism of our Lord, January 9, 2022

Luke 3/Isaiah 43

LFLC

The Rev. Tom Long, a Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta—and, not incidentally, a Presbyterian minister like our own Glenn Inglis—Tom Long tells this story:

“Recently a colleague and I were travelling to a conference in a distant city and going through the security search at the airport.

We took off our shoes; emptied our pockets of change,
put our cell phones and laptops in a separate container,
watched it all go through the X-ray while we walked through the metal detector.

As we were doing this, all of a sudden, one of the security inspectors at another checkpoint shouted “Stop!” in a very loud voice. What happened was that a man at the checkpoint had simply forgotten to take the change out of his pockets and had set off one of the metal detectors.

Unaware that he had done this, he kept on walking toward his gate.

It was really nothing. No big deal.

But when the inspector shouted “Stop!” everybody in the whole area froze and the airport grew death silent. You could almost touch the fear in the air.

As we walked to our plane, my colleague said, “You know, I think the old world where we thought we were safe and secure is gone forever.

What happened back there tells me that we don’t know what’s going to happen next in the world, and it makes us anxious and afraid.”

Reading Long’s story and reflecting on it led me to wonder how many of us who think of ourselves as people of faith could say the same thing now?

“I don’t know what’s going to happen next in the world, and it makes me afraid.”

I mean, it’s one thing to trust God, to feel close to God,
to feel sure that God is caring for us when life seems stable, secure and safe,
but what happens in those times when that old world of safety and stability dies. . .
and the winds blow and the world shakes and fearful changes
like mutating virus variants spreading rapidly and indiscriminately--
when change, terror and fear seem to be everywhere?
What happens to our faith then?

Indeed, the greatest challenges to faith come in those moments
when the world shifts on its axis and the seas roar
and the network news grows louder and the sound of fear
is as palpable as the seashore in a storm.

Tom Long tells about the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm who remembers when his safe and secure world became a world of terror.

He grew up as a Jewish orphan in Berlin and on a cold January day in 1933,
when he was only 15, he was walking his little sister home from school

when he saw at a newsstand a headline bearing the frightening news
that would change his life, change the life of all Jews. . .
change the life of the whole world.

“Adolph Hitler Appointed Chancellor of Germany” read the headline.

Later in his life, Hobsbawm reflected on that moment and said that it was as if
“we were on the Titanic and everyone knew it was going to hit the iceberg.”
As Europe hurdled out of control toward World War II,
the old world was violently ripped apart,
and a new and uncertain world began to be born.

Hobsbawm said it was difficult to describe “what it meant to live in a world
that was simply not expected to last.” It was like living, he said,
“between a dead past and a future not yet born.”

Living between a dead past and a future not yet born.

That was exactly the situation of the people of Israel who heard this word
from the prophet that we read just a few minutes ago in the 43rd chapter of Isaiah.
They were between a dead past and future not yet born.

Their old world had died—and how it happened as that the world’s great super-power,
Babylon, had marched on their home, the city of Jerusalem,
crushed it and left it in ruins.

Many Jews were taken back to Babylon as prisoners of war
where, as the Scripture puts it:

“. . .they sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept.”

They felt like they were pawns in a game they could not control and, then,
just when it was hard to believe that things could get any worse, they did.

A new power, Persia, arose in the East and was rattling its swords against Babylon.
Once again, the Jews were in harm’s way in the middle of a war zone.

Babylon was sure to be destroyed and war fears swept the city.

What would become of this weak and frightened
little colony of Jews. . .this remnant of Israel?

The wheels of history were about to roll over them again
and they were living in a world not expected to last—
between a dead past and a future not yet born. And, understandably, they were afraid!

And, then, right at this most fearful moment, there comes this amazing,
almost unbelievable word from the prophet, Isaiah, found in Chapter 40:1 -
“Comfort, O comfort, my people, says your God.”

And then, in our reading this morning three chapters later,
the prophet and poet continues by saying: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.”

“Do not fear!” . . . “Do not be afraid!” Christians, of course, recognize that word since we hear it everywhere in the New Testament.

In fact, if I have to put the gospel of Jesus into one phrase

I think it might or could be: “Do not be afraid!”

It was what the angels said to the shepherds when Jesus was born. “Do not be afraid!”

It is the first word the angel spoke on Easter morning:

“Do not be afraid.” It is what the risen Christ said to his disciples:

“Do not fear. Do not be afraid! I am with you always.”

But. . .but. . .it is one thing to say it; and it is another to believe it.

As a matter of fact, in this kind of world at this kind of time—

a time when we are living between a dead past

and a future not yet born—why shouldn’t we be afraid?

Not only has our economy stumbled and struggled
and failing supply chains have become commonplace;
not only have jobs, businesses and income evaporated for many
and the dangers of climate change become increasingly obvious
along with the usual diet of terrorist bombs in hotels and marketplaces;
and we have high schools in the US where police guard the hallways
and students are afraid to go to school or the cafeteria or the gym;
where a new variant of a deadly virus seems to pop up
just when the last one seems destined to be dealt with;

where, as Tom Long put it: “When a security inspector in a crowded airport
shouts “Stop!” and people freeze with fear. Given all of that and more
in this world of fear, it is no surprise that we are afraid. . .
and not just afraid of what is. . .but afraid of what might be . . .what might happen.

All of these are symptoms of fear—a deeper fear—

that we are frail and temporary creatures set in and living in an uncertain space and time.

We have every right and reason to be afraid!

And that is precisely why we need to hear the voice of Isaiah

saying to us—and saying it with great confidence:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine.”

You see, Isaiah knew that the One who spoke those words

is not some distant deity, some impersonal force

let loose in the universe, a god pulling the strings of history.

God is more like a mother who listens in the night

for the cries of her children. “Do not be afraid!

Fear not! For I created you; I formed you; I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name. You are mine.”

The God of Israel, the God whose story is told in this scripture,
 always calls us by name: Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Samuel, Mary.”
 The God we see in the face of Jesus—the God who walks along the shore
 and calls by name: “Peter , Andrew, John, follow me.”
 This is God who knows your name, who remembers you
 and does not and will not forget you—the God who,
 even when the winds howl and seas roar, listens for your voice, knows your cry,
 and says to each of us. . .each one of us: “Fear not. I know you.
 I have called you by name. I am coming to help you. You are mine.”

At all the churches I have ever served, we had a practice we followed
 whenever we had a baptism. People in the congregation would make banners
 for the ones to be baptized—whether infant, child or adult—
 a banner that was theirs and they got to take home with them.

At the top of the banner was the name of the person being baptized,
 and then these words were displayed below:
 “Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.”

Over the years, I have baptized hundreds of people: Babies, children, teenagers, adults,
 even those on their deathbeds. . .and always I would pour (preferably),
 or sprinkle (occasionally) and, sometimes, even just touch water
 to the forehead of the one who was dying. . .and I would say:
 Joshua, Christopher, Solomon, Gretchen, Abigail, Beatrice. . .Chloe—
 I baptize you into Jesus that you may share his death and resurrection
 in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

And I spoke their names because we believe, teach and confess
 that God calls each of them. . .calls each one of us. . .by name. . .
 and that our names are joined forever to God’s name
 in this holy and blessed washing into Christ.

Now, the truth of the matter is that none of us knows
 what our lives will hold in the future.
 We pray that our lives will be full of joy and health and peace
 but we also know that, because we are human beings,
 that we will face pain and loss and sorrow.
 We also know, as did the prophet Isaiah,
 that faith does not protect us from those realities of life.

Like all human beings, we will pass through the waters
 of life’s hardships, sorrows, and stresses.
 Like all humans, we will. . .and do. . . walk through the fires
 and cross the rivers that comes with being a human being.

But we also know that this God who has created us; formed us; redeemed us;
will never forget us; never leave us alone,
will always come to us and be with us at every turn—
and we know that because God knows us by name.

Let me close now with one last story told by Tom Long who says that he once talked
to a minister of a church located in a very dangerous part of the city
and who was always amazed by a certain woman—a member of his church—
who seemed to have no fear about coming to meetings and services at the church at night
even though she no car and would have walk home through the dark and frightening streets.

One night, after a prayer service which this woman had attended,
the pastor was locking up the church and happened to see her walking
from the church down a street toward her apartment.
And as she walked, she was holding her hands out,
as if some unseen companion was walking with her and holding her hand.

When he asked later about her doing that, she told him that,
as she walked with her hand outstretched. she hummed or sang a very familiar spiritual:
“Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on. Hold my hand.
Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.”

Amen. SDG