

Children's Time

Are you afraid of anything? What are you afraid of?

Would you like to know what I'm afraid of? I'm afraid of the dark...

So - I have this - do you think it helps me when I'm afraid?

Yep - it does - sometimes even with this big flashlight, I'm still a little scared. It helps but it doesn't always take all the fear away.

Well our scripture today comes from Isaiah - he's a prophet in the Bible. And we learn some things about God in it. One thing we learn is that God knows us really well. Our whole selves. The Bible says he calls us by name- can you tell me your whole name - God knows us whole name well. And loves us - just as we are.

The second thing the Bible tells us in the scripture we are reading today is that God knows we are afraid and promises to be with us when we are. God tells us, do not be afraid, I have called you by name, I love you, and I am with you.

That's good news. But sometimes it's a little like the flashlight - it's a LOT less scary to have it, but sometimes we're still a LITTLE scared even with it. God is with us - and remembering that should help make the world a LOT less scary, but it's ok if we're still a little afraid.

I want us to practice a prayer that we can do when we feel afraid to help us remember that God is with us ok. It's a breath prayer - so when we breathe it helps us remember. And we're always breathing. Practice breath. When we breathe in we think, God knows me. (Do it a few times). Now let's add the breath out. God is with me.

Intro

It is hard to tell now - since you've met us and our 3 kids. But the summer of 2007 could have been the end of the Ben and Cindy story forever. It almost was the end. You see after happily dating in the fishbowl that is a seminary community, we spent the summer of 2007 on opposite sides of the country. Ben was working crazy hours out in California directing residential life for what we affectionately call "nerd camp" and I was back in New Jersey taking Greek and caring for an aging yellow lab named Lady. It was hard to get our schedules to align in ways that made communication easy. It was next to impossible to make new memories together. It was, since I am telling this story, all Ben's fault. You laugh, but I felt like that a lot of the time. In reality, the distance was taking its toll. The lack of connection was wearing us down. It became more and more difficult to remember who we were. Both who we were as individuals and who WE were - what being together was like - what it meant to us. And so we started to turn away from one another. And it could have easily been the end of the story.

But then things pivoted - pretty dramatically, in fact. It started with an email. I don't remember what he said. I truly have no idea what Ben wrote in this e-mail - but I remember very clearly that I was MAD. I mean MAD. And something in me changed - I stopped trying to say all the right things, I stopped trying to pretend like this was all ok, I stopped trying to make sure I phrased everything perfectly so that I could be understood. And I just raged. I told him off. And I hit send on the email, walked out of the apartment I was staying in and went to dinner with my friends. It could have easily been the end of the story.

Believe it or not - Ben loves this story - because from his perspective - he gets this email. An email that I sent in rage - that I sent meaning to be pointed and potentially painful - Ben gets it, he reads it, and he smiles. He re-reads it and laughs a bit to himself. Not because any of it is funny but because in his telling - this is the moment that he starts to remember. The moment that he remembered that he loves my fiery side - even when directed at him apparently. It's the moment where - we both remembered who we were. We remembered

that underneath all that distance and disconnection, there was fire and grace and space to be ourselves - we remembered that each of us were individuals - who were both amazing and flawed and fiery and complicated - just as we were and all on our own. But we - were also WE - and we could create something together that made space for all of that complicated individuality while also being in relationship.

Relationship

Our scripture reading this morning, begins with the words, “But Now” which signal a significant pivot both in the tone of the prophet and also in the relationship between God and Israel. If you remember with me, way back to Isaiah 6 - the prophet is told to preach but that the people will not hear, teach and they will not understand, their eyes will not see - not even when all of Israel is laid to waste - until nothing in the land remains. And that is what has happened. Israel is laid to waste by Babylon. And the prophet says that it is because they have turned from God - they have forgotten who they are - Forgotten that they are a we - that God created with them, covenants with them. There has been disconnection and distance where once their relationship was marked with partnership and redemption. The relationship is strained and in that straining, the people forget who they are, they forget who God is - who they are together - what they might create together- as a WE.

And so we hear these words in Isaiah 42, starting in verse 18 and going until the end: Listen, you that are deaf;

and you that are blind, look up and see!

Who is blind but my servant,

or deaf like my messenger whom I send?

Who is blind like my dedicated one,

or blind like the servant of the Lord?

He sees many things, but does not observe them;

his ears are open, but he does not hear.

The Lord was pleased, for the sake of his righteousness,

to magnify his teaching and make it glorious.

But this is a people robbed and plundered,
all of them are trapped in holes
and hidden in prisons;
they have become a prey with no one to rescue,
a spoil with no one to say, "Restore!"
Who among you will give heed to this,
who will attend and listen for the time to come?
Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler,
and Israel to the robbers?
Was it not the Lord, against whom we have sinned,
in whose ways they would not walk,
and whose law they would not obey?
So he poured upon him the heat of his anger
and the fury of war;
it set him on fire all around, but he did not understand;
it burned him, but he did not take it to heart.

But now says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, 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.

Do you hear the shift? You - Israel, have been blind - you have not seen - even when you walked through the fire - even when Babylon came in and laid waste to your land, you did not understand. And **that** could have easily been the end of the story. That place of desolation, of fear, of disconnect. That place where they don't even know who they are because they are not a WE with the God who created them.

But now...but now says the Lord. Now, things are changing, now, we will remember who we are.

Remembering who WE are

It feels a bit like God is re-introducing himself to the people. Remember me? I'm the one who created you. Who formed you. Do you remember US, God seems to say. Let me remind you: I have called you by name. You are mine. We are connected. Despite the distance, despite the separation - it is in our nature to be in relationship. God says, you are precious in my sight. And honored. And I love you.

And this is not the end of the story. This is not where the relationship will stop. We are pivoting into something new. We are remembering who WE are.

So do not be afraid. You have walked through fire and desolation, but now do not be afraid for I will be with you. The rivers have swarmed around you. But now, do not be afraid for I am walking through them with you.

God re-introduces himself, reminds everyone who they are together, commands them not to be afraid and then makes a promise to the people. The command to not fear does not come with a promise that there are not things to fear. The waters still rage, the fires still burn. The original hearers, today's hearers - we do not need to look far to see that there are very real things of which to be afraid. But the promise of God, the revelation of God is that we are not alone. We are not alone.

We are in relationship. And the story of that relationship is not done.

God has been a God of creation. God has created this people - created Israel - and is creating them still. This is who God is. God is in relationship with God's people, continually creating that relationship. Out of a profound love. Even when it seems like the end of the story. Even when it looks like the raging fire, the

conquering armies, the rushing waters, the swarming injustice, the darkness of death and fear have won - God is creating anew. God is remembering who we are in relationship and saying, but now....

It fascinates me that in this text, God's "dramatic pivot", as Tom Long calls it, does not come because of anything the people do. They have not cried out for God to redeem them or crawled on their knees in repentance. There is no indication that the people of Israel have done anything to change. They are the same people they have been before the exile. They are God's people. And God continues to create their story and their relationship not because of who they are but because of who GOD is. God loves them. God calls them precious in his sight. It's in his nature. It's who God is - God is a God in relationship. And the people of God are people in ongoing relationship. The story is not finished...

Our Fear

Your story is not yet finished. I do not know the particular fears that make fresh beginnings seem unlikely to you. Perhaps the instability of work or finances, or of our national ethos at this point in time. Maybe the bleakness comes in cynicism - it is easier to intellectualize our way out of hope than it is to pivot back into relationship sometimes - and that can be just as true in our relationships with one another as it is in our relationship with the Divine. Maybe it is the reality of death - yours or someone you love's that fills you so completely with fear that you cannot see any way through.

I don't know. There is plenty to be afraid of - plenty to create disconnection and desolation with God, with those around us, with institutions that we have held dear, with our families. There is no shortage of pain and suffering and endings. So, I don't know where you need to hear the words that pivot the story - I don't know what in your life needs a "But now" moment - a place to remember....A reassurance....do not be afraid. You will pass through the fire - and you will not be alone.

I do not know what in your life needs a fresh start - a new beginning - But I wonder if we can hear these words for us. I wonder if we can remember who we are - remember that we are God's people - a people in relationship. I wonder if we can remember who God is.

I am the one who created you - who made you my people, says the Lord.

I love you. You are precious to me.

Do not be afraid.

I am with you.

Do not be afraid.

The story is still being written.

Do not be afraid....

Amen