

## ***Guiding Promises***

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

*Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church*

*Sunday, January 7, 2007; Bryn Mawr, PA*

Isaiah 43:1-7

*“I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

Epiphany / Baptism of Our Lord

### *Movement 1 – Fear*

Are you afraid? Are you trembling, are you biting you nails, are you looking over you shoulder? Are you afraid? Do you worry about the economy, do you worry about your health, do you worry about your finances; are you afraid? Are you afraid of termites, are you afraid of democrats or are you afraid of republicans? Are you afraid?

Fear is a basic human emotion. It is a part of our very lives, it is something that at times can keep us safe and at times can paralyze us. We fear what we cannot know and what we cannot control. The writer H.P. Lovecraft once wrote, “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.” When we send our children to school for the first time, or even to college, we face a certain amount of fear because we just do not know what they will face, and we are not there to protect them. When you are alone in the church late one night, and you hear noises, you may become afraid because you do not know where the noises come from. We all face fear. We fear.

On his nightly show, *The Colbert Report*, Stephen Colbert has a regular feature called the “Threatdown.” In this feature, Colbert shares with the nation all of the threats that people should be afraid of. Items range from toys, to cereal, to Jacki Chan, to bears. Usually the number one threat is bears. Colbert is saying in his beautiful satire that we all should be afraid all of the time, and he is just reminding us of some of the things we should fear.

Yet we do not need someone to tell us what it is that we should fear. We do not need to be reminded. It does not take long to look at our life, to think about our life, and to list off all of the things which we rightly should fear. We are surrounded by reasons; we walk through life with fear. We all fear. Are you afraid? Are you trembling, are you looking over you shoulder, are you enduring sleepless nights? Are you afraid?

### *Movement 2 – Fear of Being Alone*

Are you afraid of having a relationship with Christ? Yet at the same time, are you afraid of being alone? Do you desire that relationship, that connection, that deep knowing that only Christ can offer you the true relationship which you need, but something holds you back? We want to have a relationship with God through Christ. We long for that most perfect companionship. It is a part of who we are.

Many would argue that humans are social creatures, that human’s desire and long for a companion; isolation would be difficult to endure. I think of Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby* and wonder if Gatsby had lavish parties not only to impress the woman of his dreams, but also to surround himself with others so that he wouldn’t be alone. Gatsby longed for companionship in the elite society of Long Island, and in the eyes of one girl, Daisy. Or remember Tom Hank’s character in *Cast Away*? He created a person out of a volleyball so that he would not be alone on his island. His character needed a companion, needed someone to be in relation with. Hank’s character feared being alone.

Do you have a similar fear? Maybe you don’t need to have a lot of friends. Maybe you don’t desire a large crowd, but to at least have one other person, to at least have two or three for support is important. You don’t want to be alone. We thrive the companionship, we thrive for a relationship. And as I suggested, our deepest longing is towards a relationship with God through Christ. As Augustine said, “My heart is restless until it finds rest in thee.” We want to have a relationship with God. We don’t want our relationship to be similar to

the description in Longfellow's poem, *The Theologian's Tale: Elizabeth*. In this poem he writes "Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing. Only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; so on the ocean of life, we pass and speak one another from a distance, only a look and a voice; then darkness again and a silence."

We don't want to have a relationship with Christ that feels like two ships passing in the night. This landscape that Longfellow paints is bleak and stark. It is not a place where we would want to go. We don't want that isolation, that separation. We don't want to be alone, and we fear being alone. Yet do you ever feel like that is your relationship with Christ? Do you ever feel that you are separate from God and you fear that separation?

When this passage of Isaiah was written, it was written to Israelites who feared that they were indeed alone. They were in Babylon, far from home. They were beaten militarily, they were taken captive, and forced to move to Babylon where they were made to be servants and slaves of the Babylonians. And in this strange land, they feared that they had lost their relationship with God. You could almost hear their questions concerning the presence of God. Where is God, many wondered. They wondered if God had left them, if God had abandoned them to this strange country. They were afraid that Israel and Judea were alone, isolated from the heavenly hosts. They feared that God had left them, and were not sure if they could reconnect.

What if God has left us? What if God has abandoned us? It is not a far-fetched question, it is a thought that we all may have pondered from time to time. When you received that disheartening diagnosis, did you wonder if God had left you? When you felt your family split apart for various reasons did you wonder if God had left you? When you witnessed your friends hurt, your family's suffering, and your community fall to despair, did you wonder if God had left you? When you entered into darkness in your life, when all you knew was despair, when all you could feel was the cold of the barren landscape of your life, did you wonder if God was there?

There may be times when you just feel like God is distant. There may be times when you feel like you just cannot maintain the relationship with God that you desire to have. There may be times when you fear that you cannot walk the path that Jesus calls you to walk, that you cannot be the person that Jesus calls you to be, and you fear losing your relationship with God. It can be difficult; it can be scary to maintain a relationship with God through Christ, because sometimes we feel as if we are alone. Yet the alternative is threatening as well. The alternative of abandoning our relationship leads to silence and you feel alone.

### *Movement 3 – Initial Comfort*

God speaks to our fears and offers us assurance. God hears the people of Israel, God hears you and offers assurance that we need not be afraid. Through the writings in Isaiah, through the hope in the prophets, God speaks to our fear telling us that we will never be without the presence of God. We are assured that God will always be with us. This is our initial assurance, this is our initial comfort. The knowledge that we are never without the presence of God gives us strength. We need not fear.

The Israelites were afraid because they felt and they worried that they were alone. They considered their captivity, they considered the abject state of their living and they feared that they were alone. They were far from their home, and could not imagine God's presence so many miles from what was familiar. They were so far from Jerusalem that it felt difficult to imagine God still with them in this strange and foreign land. So they worried that God had abandoned them, left them and they felt alone.

But God speaks to them and calls them out of their darkness, out of their despair and promises them that they are not alone. They need not fear, because God is at their side. Even in this foreign land, even when people struggled to create something sacred for families to enjoy. They need not fear because they are not alone.

God speaks the same word of hope to us, that we need not fear, because we are not alone. Can you hear that word of hope? Can you hear this promise? Can you feel the comfort, and the relief that we find in such a good word. You have company, you have a presence that will always give you comfort. You are not alone.

When you face that exam, you are not alone. When you move to a new and strange place, you are not alone. When you face illness, you are not alone. When you worry about the choices you have made in life, remember that you are not alone. You may feel distant from God, but God is not distant from you. God is with you, even in the farthest places, even in the most desperate circumstances, you are not alone.

This is what many theologians call the imminent nature of God. It is the ever-present nature of God. It is what Process Theologians call God's divine lure always guiding us and comforting us in life to make the best choices. Or it is what Paul Tillich referred to as the ground of all being. God is the source of all creation, and is present with all creation; God is the foundation of all that we do and all that we are.

Or maybe you see this constant presence as the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God always with us, guiding us, and comforting us. It is that fire which gives us courage, and that passion which gives us strength. It is the Spirit which washed us the day when we gave our lives to Christ, and it is the Spirit that comforted us in times of trouble and distress. No matter how you understand it, know that you are not alone, and you no longer need to fear. God gives us support, and God is the foundation we need so we can face all the other fears in our life. Because now we know that we are not alone.

It is like Obi Wan Knobi in the *Star Wars* movies. After Knobi is killed, he promises Luke that he will never be alone. We find in later movies that Knobi is with Luke on the ice planet of Hoth, and other places in the world. Luke is not alone.

We have that presence and that assurance but in a much more profound way. We have God with us always and we are not alone.

We need not fear because God gives us words of assurance. We need not fear because God gives us a promise of comfort. When you are in sorrow, know that God is with you. When you are in agony, know that God is with you. This is an initial hope that we are given, that we will never, no never be alone.

We are not alone when we face those who oppress us, persecute us, and bring us down. We are not alone when we suffer, when we hurt and when we fall. We are not alone when we go through all of the trials and the difficulties of life. We are not alone.

#### *Movement 4 – A Deeper Comfort of Creation*

Yet we are given a word of comfort that goes deeper than God's presence. The promise does not stop with just the presence of God, but speaks to who we are. We are given a word of hope and a word of comfort that speaks to our very identity, our very existence, our very sense of being.

Maybe we hear that God is always with us, but we wonder if we deserve such support and grace. Maybe we wonder if we are worthy of God's holy and divine support. Maybe you find yourself wondering, who am I to walk with Jesus? Who am I to share the love of God? Who am I to be an active, leading part of God's community? After all, none of us seem to have the grace of Joseph the dreamer, or of Jacob, or of Abraham. Yet here is the promise that we hear from the prophet. Not only will God be with us, but we have been formed, we have been created, and we have been named by God. This gives us confidence; this word gives us hope and gives us assurance.

Think of how the Israelites must have felt after they were beaten by Babylon. Think how they must have wondered not only if God had left them, but also if they were indeed people of worth. They were warned by Isaiah, by Jeremiah, by Ezekiel and by others that unless they turned from their worship of false gods, their love of power and prestige, and their concern only for themselves, then they would fall to the world. Yet the leaders of the Israelites did not heed the call and the warning of the prophets. They did not turn from their ways, and they fell to a foreign power. Now the Israelites are weeping by the waters of Babylon, they are crying for their homeland and wondering if they have been left by God because they have left God. They must have wondered if they were worthwhile at all, or if they were a people who deserved to be discarded and assimilated into another country. They were broken and discouraged and wondering if redemption was possible at all.

Think of a person with an addiction. This is a person who has fallen into a cycle of destruction, this is a person who again and again falls, who is caught, and who has hurt so many individuals. Maybe there is a moment in sobriety when this individual looks at himself and wonders if he is at all a worthwhile person. Maybe this is a person who feels that he has hurt and destroyed everyone he loves and holds dear, and now the path of recovery seems daunting. Is it a path he deserves? Is it a way he should go? Maybe he should just give into the addiction. Maybe he will never be able to beat the gnawing and yearnings in his life. Maybe he has hurt so many people and ruined so many lives that he deserves to be alone.

But imagine that this person's mother, that person's brother or sister, someone in that person's life goes to him and looks at him as says, "You are a precious child, you are special, and no matter what, I will always love you."

This is what God is doing with the Israelites and with us. God is speaking to the Israelites and saying, "You are my children, and I love you. I created you and you are indeed worthwhile. I will never leave you." Even though the Israelites have turned from God, even though they had neglected the poor and the weak, even though they began to look to other gods for help and assurance, God assures them that they are not worthless because they were created by God. God says, "I have formed you, I have named you and you are mine." God affirms their worth, their dignity and their glory.

This is the word of hope that we are given by God. That we are created, formed and made precious is a promise and a comfort we can receive. Can you hear and can you receive this assurance? This is an assurance we all need to hear. It is like telling a child that he or she is special. And let me urge you to say that to children as often as possible. You need not fear when you are called by Christ. You need not say, "I am not worthy." You need not say, "I am not fit to share the love of Jesus." Maybe you cannot preach like Peter, maybe you cannot pray like Paul, but you can still share the love of Jesus, who died to save us all. (Taken from *There Is a Balm in Gilead*)

Have you ever watched the Television show *Veggie Tales*? Each episode ends with the characters saying, "Remember, God made you special and he loves you very much." This is the further promise, the further hope that we find in Isaiah.

You have been created by God. We have been formed by God. This church has been named by God. We have been ordained, washed, and empowered to be God's children. We have been named the sons and daughters of the Lord. We have been redeemed. This is hope and comfort in the face of all of our fears.

#### *Movement 5 – Hope in Trials*

We are to carry this hope with us into tomorrow. We carry this hope as we continue with life. Yet there is a hard reality about this hope. We will not be spared from trials. We will not be spared from temptations and difficulties. The prophet does not promise that we will never face hardships again. What we find in this hope is that even as we pass through the waters, we need not fear because God will be with us. We will still have to walk through the waters. We will still have to walk through fire, but God will be with us. We will face temptations, we will face difficulties, but have hope, have courage because you are not alone, and God is with you.

Remember Moses and the Israelites. They had to run from the Egyptians. They had to suffer in the wilderness. But God did not leave them. Remember Joseph and his dreamy coat. He was sold as a slave, he was cast into prison, he suffered, but God did not leave him. Remember the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. "we must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." These are the words of a man who was yelled at, spat at, and beaten, jailed, threatened and eventually killed. But can you say that King was alone? Can you say that God left King as he penned his letter in a Birmingham jail? Can you say that God left King as his house was bombed? Even through the trials and the difficulties, God did not leave him.

I think of our Lord, who's Baptism we recognize today. As he came up from the waters, he heard a voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved..." God is naming Jesus; God is claiming Jesus, and forming Jesus. Can we say that God left Jesus when crowds mocked him? Can we say that God left Jesus when his own friends left him? Can we say that God left Jesus even as he hung on the cross? God did not leave him, but stayed at his side through all of the trials and the troubles. God did not leave him.

Yes, o children of God, o people of Lower Merion Baptist Church, God will not leave you. Even when you pass through the waters. Even when you walk through the fire, God will not leave you. When you face sickness and death, God is still with you. When you face hardships and trials, God is with you. When you endure trials and difficulties because your faith, when walking with Jesus leads to difficulties, God is still with you. Open your heart to God's guiding, to God's leading and to God's comfort in all of your trials, for God will stay with you. Even when you take a chance and step outside of your comfort zone, even when you take a chance and share with someone the love of Jesus, even when you call out the isims of this world and face rejection for going against the way of the world, God will not leave you. When you face pain, when you face sickness, when you face difficulties, God will not leave you. We will face trials, we will face difficulties, but we will never be alone.

#### *Movement 6 – Fear No More*

Are you afraid? Do you tremble, do you fear? Are you afraid? You need not fear any more. Not because all will be right with the world. Until the Kingdom of God is fully in the here and now, we will still face violence, evil, sickness and death. We will still face trials and temptations. Yet remember that you are made holy; you are called, formed and named by God. You are somebody special loved by the Lord. Walk with Jesus into the world; walk with that most special person into the highways and byways of life knowing that you are loved. Face the mocking knowing that you have been named by God. Stand up to the powers that bring others down, stand up to the sentiments of hate that try to convince others that they are worthless. Stand up to them and speak the truth to their face that you are a blessed child of God, named, formed and created by that Holy presence.

Are you afraid? Do not fear any longer but live with boldness, a bravado rooted in the presence of God. Are you afraid? Face the winds of the world, stand tall and let go of your fear. Are you afraid? You do not need to be afraid because you are God's child, named, formed and blessed? You no longer need to be afraid.

AMEN