

Getting to Know Jesus, the Christ

Sept 7, 2014

Barriers to Accepting Salvation - Fear

Psalm 149 & Isaiah 43:1
(625,746, 530, 556)

I suggested in our ponderings on this text this week
that we think about the fears that haunt us most.
My list was pretty long, by the time I got to Saturday.
It included fear of rejection, pain, death,
loss of income, loss of health, loss of family,
failure to please, failure to contribute, failure to feel joy.

As the list was building all week,
I felt a strange sensation.
Well, actually it was a strangely familiar sensation.
I was getting more and more protective of myself.
I was noticing barriers that emerged in my dealings with people,
barriers I had put up to protect myself against what I feared.
I was more cautious, more skeptical, more distant, more cranky,
less open, less positive, less proactive.
As the fears built up on the list, I shut down.
I retreated into my protective shell,
where I felt very much alone and alienated.

It is not a pleasant place to be – alone, surrounded by fears.

At times in the past, I've gotten stuck there for relatively long periods of time.
I have friends who are stuck there now, and have been for far too long.
Being alone, surrounded by fears, drained of any positive energy,
can feel like hell.
Indeed, many Christians thinkers consider this kind of separation –
from our positive selves, others, and God –
to be the true nature of hell.

Hard as it is, at times, to break through the protective shell
that we build around us when we succumb to our fears,
it can be done.

What I want to do for a few minutes this morning
is explore a Christian perspective on how that happens.

At the heart of this process is God's loving desire
to reconnect with us in ways that free us
to be the blessings he created us to be.

There are a couple of very important things to remember
in this exploration.

First, it is God's power, working within us and among us,
that provides the crucial connections
that can bring us through our fears
into the freedom of Christian faith.

Second, fears are a natural and necessary part of human flourishing.
Fearless people are foolish people.

The issue is how we proactively deal with and control our fears,
rather than allowing them to control and define us,
which was happening to me at times this week.

So, in a nutshell, we open ourselves to God's power of love
to cast out the controlling power of our fears.

I was thinking this week about Dan Reynolds in Montreal this week
and his work on his jazz suite based on the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I got an e-mail from him to say it was going well
and he was discovering all sorts of nuances in the story
that he had not seen before.

He sent his love and prayers to all of us.

On one level,
and, as Dan is discovering, even after 3-4 years,
there are many levels to discover in a story like this,
this is a story about the fear of rejection
being overcome by the love of the father –
undeserved, free, unconditional love
that was there all along,
unnoticed and unappreciated.

The Israelites Isaiah is writing and preaching to were in the same boat.
They didn't notice or appreciate their relationship with their Maker.
They had lost touch with the positive power of God's love.

In their fear, they had latched onto false sources of hope –
themselves, other conceptions of God, protective forms of power.
But they remained trapped, enslaved really, by their fears.

This simple verse chosen as our Memorize & Ponder text this morning
sets things right, helps us see things afresh in their proper perspective.

It comes in the midst of a series of chapters in Isaiah
where the prophet's witness is assuring Israel of God's ongoing love.
These chapters lay out the hope that can be relied upon
when one has accepted the salvation offered by one's Maker,
by the intentional energy that formed us from the start.

That salvation involves a reconnection with one's Maker,
a reconciliation that is our Maker's initiative,
that comes from God – undeserved, unconditional, and unlimited.
It is freedom from the grip of fears for all peoples.
It is the source of justice and peace.
It is the love that saves us
to be the flourishing blessings God made us to be.
It is the reality Dan is playing himself into this month in Montreal.
I can't wait to hear what he has found
in that wonderful story of the unconditionally loving father.

We gather this morning yet again at the table
prepared by and presided over by Jesus,
the Christ who faced and conquered all the fears humans can imagine.
He felt those fears, but was not overwhelmed or controlled by them.
Rather, he pioneered a life controlled by God's gracious love.
We are fed and nourished to enjoy that life,
life in Christ,
at this table this morning.

Come to the table with all your fears, then lay them aside
as you feel the welcoming, laughing face of God in Jesus Christ,
filling us with the freedom of hope through the work of the Holy Spirit.

That is what is happening here, now.
Join me in enjoying this amazing grace.