

I'll Be There

Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3: 15-17; 21-22

Whitefish UMC

Baptism of the Lord Sunday, January 10, 2010

- As the peak holiday travel season winds down, one thing is clear: the old world where we thought we were safe and secure is gone forever. What with planes overshooting runways, trains on the famed Eurostar stalled in the tunnel under the Atlantic, and terrorists setting their underwear on fire in hopes of blowing up a plane, travel at any time these days is risky business.
- We're tempted to remember fondly days when things were simpler and more certain—not just for travelers but in our homes and in our world. For the past sixty years, we've mostly felt safe in our own country at least. Now we are not so sure, and it makes us anxious and afraid.
- Even though we think of ourselves as people of faith, the anxiety and malaise of these days creep into our consciousness. It's one thing to feel close to God, to feel God caring for us when life seems stable, secure, and safe, but what happens in those times when the old world where we thought we were safe and secure dies and the winds blow and the world shakes and fearful change and terror appear to be at every turn? What happens to our faith then?
- For the greatest challenges to faith come when the world shifts on its axis and the seas roar with fearful change. Thomas Long tells of the

writing of the great historian Eric Hobsbawm, who remembers just such a time. Hobsbawm grew up a Jewish orphan in Berlin.

- On a cold January day in 1933 when he was just 15 years old, he was walking his little sister home from school when he saw at a newsstand the headline that would change his world and the world of Jews and everyone else: “Adolph Hitler Appointed Chancellor of Germany.”
- Later in his life, Hobsbawm reflected on that moment and said it was as if “we were on the Titanic and everyone knew it was going to hit the iceberg.” As Europe hurtled out of control toward World War II, the old world was violently ripped apart, and the new and uncertain world began to be born.
- Hobsbawm said that 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 Jews in the Bible who heard this word from the prophet Isaiah that we read just a few minutes ago. Because they were between a dead past and a future not yet born.
- The world’s great superpower, Babylon, had marched on their home, the city of Jerusalem and crushed it and left it in ruins. The famous words from the psalm put into the Bob Marley song “by the rivers of Babylon, where we sat down, and there we wept as we remembered Zion,” were written during that period.
- For Jewish prisoners were taken captive and felt like pawns in a game they could not control. And then, just when it seemed as if things

- couldn't get any worse, they did. A new power, Persia, threatened the Babylonian Empire. War fears swept the land.
- The people asked, “what will become of us?” as the wheels of war threatened to roll over them yet again. They were living again between a dead past and a future not yet born, and they were afraid.
 - But into this fearful story came word of comfort and joy: “Comfort, comfort ye my people, speak tenderly to Jerusalem...do not be afraid, I am with you.” And we recognize these words—not just because they come from Handel’s Messiah, which we heard during the Christmas season.
 - We hear them because they are the essential message of our faith, ingrained in us from the foundation of the world and affirmed at our baptism. They are the words Jesus spoke to his disciples, even after the worst had happened—the death on the cross of their Lord.
 - “Do not be afraid, I am with you always, even until the end of the age.” But do we internalize these words and believe them and live them? Even in our relatively secure little corner of the world, we face fears about our health, our jobs, our relationships, and the future for us and those we love.
 - Add to that the really big questions like “Why am I here, what really matters, and will I make any difference?” and it’s no wonder we try to dull our senses with too much stuff, food, alcohol, drugs, you name it.
 - To help keep myself from being too overcome with questions and fearfulness, I return to W. H. Auden’s poem, “For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio.” Written in 1941-42 in the early days of World War II, Auden takes the Christmas story and weaves it with modern

language and experience in order to tell the story of humanity's alienation, fears, and hope.

- In one scene, Auden has the three “wise men” serve as examples of intellectual pride gone to seed. He describes the first wise man as a scientist who keeps on manipulating data to get the desired results. Finally that scientific wise man says: “To discover how to be truthful now/is the reason I follow this star.”
- The second wise man is characterized by Auden as a philosopher who cannot settle his philosophy about the meaning of time. The wise man philosopher says: “With envy, terror, rage, regret,/We anticipate or remember but never are./To discover how to be living now is the reason I follow this star.”
- Auden's third wise man is a sociologist who keeps looking in all the wrong places for a just society. He concludes: “To discover how to be loving now/is the reason I follow this star.”
- And then all three wise men, complaining of the long, weary, journey, speak these words:
- *The weather has been awful,
The countryside is dreary,
Marsh, jungle, rock, and echoes mock
Calling our hope unlawful.
But a silly song can help along
Yours ever and sincerely:
At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,*

But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.

To discover how to be human now

Is the reason we follow this Star.

- We are each on a journey to discover how to be human—to be the human God created us to be, in God’s own image, called by name by God. Jesus had to discover that, too.
- Luke’s Gospel tells us that Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized, to be called by name—“My beloved Son” and sealed with the Spirit for the journey of his life—for healing the sick, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, and seeking justice for the poor as well as the rich.
- God calls us in our baptisms, too, to claim who we are meant to be, just as God claims us by name. Joanna Adams says that she believes something happens between God and us in our baptisms: “This one is mine!” the Lord exclaims. “I see my image in her! Don’t you see my image in him? And here comes my Spirit to sustain and guide as you go about doing what I put you on earth to do.”
- She cites a poem by James Autry that has long been a favorite:

*There is something about putting people under the water and
raising*

*Them up in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
something*

That makes people cry

That makes them want everything to be alright.

That makes them want to leave this place better and better,

To immerse themselves in their lives

*And somehow be washed clean of all the things they should not
have done*

And still should not want to do.

That's it.

Not the other things,

The star in the East,

The treasures in heaven

Or any of the old stories,

Not even life after death.

It's only to be new again.

- So here we are, at the beginning of a new decade, living between the death of the past and the future not yet born. How will we approach it? Fearfully or with hope and joy—because we are called by name and claimed by God.
- We can be sure of one thing: we may not live this year any more perfectly than we did last year, but with God's mercy and grace, we will have the strength we need for the days ahead.
- I love the story about an incident following an infant's baptism. On the way home from worship, the brother of the baby who had been baptized cried from the back seat all the way home. Three times his dad asked him what he was crying about.
- Finally the little boy answered, "The preacher said he wanted us to be brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you guys."
- God wants the same for us. We may not always look or act or live as if we trust the promises of God, but God wants to stay with us anyway. In fact, let's close with these words of the great Carl Jung:

- *Bidden or unbidden, called or not called, God is present.* We are called by God's name, and we can now call upon that name with confidence in God's faithfulness and the power and presence of the Spirit.
- We do this to learn to be human, again, even and especially in uncertain times like these. Amen.
- (The congregation participated in a reaffirmation of their baptisms following the sermon.)

Sources:

George C. Heider, "Living by the Word," *Christian Century*, December 29, 2009.

Rev. James Grant, "To discover how to be human is the reason we follow this star," <http://www.uusm.org>

Thomas Long, "Called by Name," <http://day1.org>

Joanna Adams, "God Believes in You," <http://day1.org>