

“Wonders of God’s Love”
January 1, 2012
Scripture: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7

New Year is a time to look forward to the possibilities that lie on our horizon, but it can also be a chance to look back and to see what has brought us to where we are. St. Augustine once said that as he looked ahead in his life it was as if standing on a porch and seeing his footprints in the dirt in complete disarray like chicken scratches all over the yard. But when he looked behind him he could see his footprints in a straight line leading to where he stood. The reality is we can’t really know much about what lies ahead, but we can at least discern some measure of guidance bringing us to where we are.

That’s what the prophet seems to count on when he proclaims good news for Israel’s future. Their past has been a hard one and their present isn’t much better, but as they look back into the history of their relationship with God, they can take heart in God’s promise of deliverance and vindication. Isaiah sees Israel’s circumstances within the context of their whole history; nothing is experienced in isolation because God’s love is steadfast and everlasting. That’s why over and over in scripture the Exodus is used as the standard by which to judge current events. Even though it may seem that God is absent, they know from the experience of their ancestors in Egypt that God will ultimately deliver them.

It’s hard to know, of course, how convincing those promises were to the people involved. We do know from painful experience that sometimes our circumstances are so hard, our losses so deep, that nothing can relieve them. And surely Isaiah realizes that. He knows what his people have been through. So he’s not simply offering some kind of cheery optimism, a sort of cosmic pipe-dream. God’s purpose through him is to offer hope, something that runs much deeper than optimism ever could. Theologian Miroslav Volf makes the distinction: “Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have come to be; hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are...”

Finding cause for hope when we’re in despair can feel like salvation itself. And after the past year, when we’ve seen so much difficulty in the world because of war, natural disaster and famine, and in our own country because of unemployment and political gridlock, and in our personal lives because of heartbreaking losses or damaged relationships or illnesses, finding a reason for hope can be life saving.

The people of Israel rooted their hope in a God whose faithfulness was revealed generation to generation. And we root our hope in a God whose faithfulness is revealed through the birth of a child “born of a woman, born under the Law.” By identifying so thoroughly as to become one of us God has adopted us, as it were, and made us true children of God. So there is no longer cause to doubt God’s commitment to us. The wonder of God’s love is revealed in this ultimate gesture of solidarity.

Christ is our hope because Christ reveals that God is with us. No matter what our circumstances might be, no matter how devastating our losses or insurmountable our difficulties we are not alone.

That means we no longer need to turn to other sources to find assurance. At the heart of Paul's words to the Galatian Christians was the concern that they were falling back on old practices to guarantee their safety. They were hedging their bets by listening to other Christians with a different gospel. But the gospel they were being fed was no good news at all. They were being told that God's regard for them was conditional, that Jesus' birth alone wasn't enough. They also needed to appease God by entering through the door of circumcision. Without that sign on their bodies, they were being told, God would not recognize them as part of the family.

Now I suspect that's a belief Paul himself might have embraced at one time. He was, after all, a devout Jew and trained in the religious practices of a Pharisee. But once he gave up relying on the path of his ancestors, once he became convinced that God had entered the world in a new way, he saw no reason to hold others to the old ways. The discovery Paul made in his encounter with Christ was to learn that God's love is not restricted to one path. So the Galatian Christians had nothing to fear; their hope was secure in Christ.

It can be hard, at times, to trust the wonders of the God's love. We're surrounded by so much uncertainty, so much pain and loss, that we may find ourselves looking for some way to guarantee God's love. We gravitate toward certain rituals or certain prayers that we think will draw God's attention to us so we'll be recognized as part of God's family. But our hope lies in God's insistence on claiming us as God's own in Jesus' birth; it lies in God's holding us up as a crown of beauty and instilling in our hearts the cry of "Abba! Father!"

We enter this New Year enfolded in that love. In spite of what has gone before, no matter what lies ahead, we are God's own. Jesus' birth is all the assurance we need of that. His ministry among us, his death, his resurrection reveal a God who will not give us up to a world of pain and disappointment and loss and will not give up on us no matter how far off the path we might wander. In Christ God enters the world anew and in Christ God makes us new, clothed with salvation, a royal diadem in God's own hand; every one of us a wonder of God's love.

Amen