

January 10, 2009
Isaiah 43: 1-7
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As we look into the future of a new year many of us can't help but be fearful of what lies ahead. What will this year bring? Will the war on terror, drugs, and corrupt governments continue? Will more and more soldiers and civilians be killed? Will our airports be so impacted by terrorism and fear that people will simply stop flying; locking us onto our respective continents and travelling only to places that can be reached by car or train? There is so much to fear in our ultra-modern world; nuclear weapons, chemical warfare, guns, crazy people, financial ruin. How many of you go through your day thinking about your future through the lens of fear?

It was no different in ancient times. The people of 2,000 years ago feared their rulers, the weather, war, starvation, disease, the gods, etc. That's the problem with fear; it is always with us at some time during our lives. There is not a person alive now or in the past that has gone through their entire life without some kind of fear.

Jesus was no exception to this. Jesus lived with fear too. He had a job to do, a big job, and for some of it he had to be afraid of what would happen. Jesus had to have been afraid as the end of his life came along and he knew the inevitable was about to happen. Of course he was. The difference between us and Jesus and our fears is that Jesus went immediately to God through prayer when his fears became too great. We know that because the stories of the Bible tell us that at every breaking point in Jesus' ministry he went to God in prayer. When life on the road got tough, he sent the disciples away or he went on his own to pray; he spent time in the desert, praying; he spent time in the garden before his arrest and crucifixion in prayer. We can only imagine that scene, the words of scripture describe Jesus as pleading with God to take this cup away.

Sometimes our prayers are desperate pleas. Can you think of times in your life when at a point of fear you went to God in prayer? Not just with the shopping list of wants but in desperate need of help to get through something or to find some peace within yourself.

These are the times that historian, Eric Hobsbawm recalls as "between a dead past and a future not yet born." What has happened has happened and how or if it will affect our future is yet to be seen.

Hobsbawm made this statement when his safe and secure world became a world of terror. He grew up as a Jewish orphan in Berlin. On a cold January day in 1933 when he was only 15 years old, he was walking his little sister home from school when he saw at a newsstand a headline bearing frightening news that would change his life, change the life of all Jews, change the life of the whole world. "Adolph Hitler Appointed Chancellor of Germany," the headline read. 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 hurdled 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."

I was struck by the statement he made about living in a world that was simply not expected to last and I couldn't help but think of our church. Are we living within the church in a world that is simply not expected to last? Some fear-mongers would suggest that we are; that it is inevitable that the institution of the church must die. Where do you sit in regard to this issue or has it even entered your mind?

Certainly there is reason to be afraid; just this week we received a letter from our General Secretary the CEO of the National Church, Nora Sanders, telling us that we as a National body will have a 6.5 million dollar shortfall for the 2011-2013 period. Certainly we have become very aware that within our individual congregations we have seen a decline in attendance and financial support in our churches across the country. The United Church of Canada will celebrate its 85th anniversary this year, and although young for a denomination its history is second to none on how it has brought the gospel of Jesus alive in local communities; fighting for justice, reaching out to those in need, showing the world that we care about the world not just our little piece of it.

It is in these troubling times, when we have honest and realistic discussion about our churches in our local communities we must remember the words of Isaiah in chapter 43:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When 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. ³For I am your God, the Holy One of Israel, your deliverer.

We must remember that when we are stuck between a dead past and a future not yet born the words of Isaiah: Do Not Fear. I am with you.

This was exactly the situation of the Jews in the Bible listening to the prophet Isaiah. They were between a dead past and a future not yet born. Their old world had died. The Babylon armies had marched on the Israelites home, the city of Jerusalem, crushed it, and left it in ruins. Imagine being taken back to Babylon as a war prisoner. It is said that the Jewish prisoners "sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept." They had no control of the situation and just when they thought that things couldn't get any worse, they did. Persia decided to flex its muscle against Babylon from the East and once again, the Jews were in harm's way in the middle of a war zone. Surely Babylon would be destroyed. What would become of the weak and frightened little colony of Jews? Once again crushed under the wheels of history they must have thought they were living in a world not expected to last, between a dead past and a future not yet born. And they were afraid.

And they heard the words again. Do Not Be Afraid. For us today this is the battle cry of the Christian.

"Do not be afraid." It is what the angels said to the shepherds in Bethlehem when Jesus was born: "Do not be afraid." It is the first word the angel spoke on Easter morning: "Do not be afraid." It is what the risen Christ said to his disciples: "Do not be afraid. I am with you always."

We hear the words but do we believe them? Do they comfort us?

The philosopher Pascal expressed fear like this, "When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, this little space which I fill and even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I am ignorant and which know me not, I am afraid...."

It may not be the big things or little things in our daily life that feed our fear; it may be the fact that we sit between a dead past and a future not yet born. If we would take to heart and have faith in the words of Isaiah we may not feel so afraid.

The prophet Isaiah can say, "'Do not be afraid', with such confidence because Isaiah knew that the God who spoke those words is not some distant deity, some impersonal force loose in the universe disconnected from human experience, a god pulling the strings of history. Our God is more like a mother who listens in the night for the cries of her children. "'Do not be afraid,' says our God, 'I created you. I formed you. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. I am always with you.'"

Do we have anything to fear if we trust in this? Of course we do, we will always have fears but our comfort comes in knowing that even in our most fearful times; the worst of times; as well as the best of times God is with us, God will not abandon us.

Thanks be to God. Amen