

**Joy and Resistance in a Time of Fear**  
**Isaiah 43:1-2, 5-7; Exodus 14:5-25**  
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*Isaiah:*

*43 But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:*

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

*<sup>2</sup> When 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.*

*<sup>5</sup> Do not fear, for I am with you;  
I will bring your offspring from the east,  
and from the west I will gather you;*

*<sup>6</sup> I will say to the north, 'Give them up',  
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;*

*bring my sons from far away  
and my daughters from the end of the earth—*

*<sup>7</sup> everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made.'*

*Exodus:*

*5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed towards the people, and they said, 'What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?' <sup>6</sup> So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; <sup>7</sup> he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. <sup>8</sup> The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. <sup>9</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.*

*10 As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.' <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'*

*15 Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. <sup>16</sup> But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.*

*<sup>17</sup> Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.'*

*19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. <sup>20</sup>It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.*

*21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup>The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup>The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. <sup>24</sup>At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. <sup>25</sup>He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.'*

Given the world we live in today, we often find ourselves in a constant state of fear. Regardless of political affiliation, or non-affiliation, things are happening that make one question their safety, mental well being, and physical well being. Not only one's own safety, but the safety of children and loved ones. Supreme Court decisions, new laws, inaction, and the nefarious intent on the part of individuals, corporations, and organizations, we have cause to fear for our very lives. We fear for both our physical lives and our lives as we know them. We are told if we are not angry, or fearful, we are not paying attention.

We come to church on Sunday and experience something different. The messages we hear, from our prayers, songs, and sermons are not ones of anxiousness or fear, but of love, discipleship, and as of late, joy. And the further we progress with these Sundays I can't help but think how completely countercultural it is to proclaim joy in a world that wants us to live armed and afraid, demonizing difference and promoting superiority for a certain section of the population. What a different message to be proclaiming joy, for everyone!

So in this time in history, we talk again about resistance. While for some this is rather new, folks have been resisting Empire and all its spoils for quite some time now, particularly in Christian history. Whether it's Caesar, war, genocide, or bigotry, we want to proclaim Gods love for all people. We all want to be on the right side of history, and be the known dissenter in a world that's seemingly gone mad. I know I've fallen into the trap of wanting to be one of "those" people. I'd like to think I would have marched to Selma, resisted the Nazis, been a part of the Underground Railroad and of course, stayed awake with Jesus the night before

the crucifixion. I mean, I could do it, right? You could do it? It would be the right thing to do. Of course we would do it.

And maybe we would. But resistance is really difficult. It's one thing to post our dislike of Empire on social media, and it's quite another to live into a space where we actively resist the evil around us. We're only human, and we do what we can. And don't get me wrong, saying "Yes, and" in a fallen world takes lots of different types of action. Yet we find ourselves inspired by super-human bravery and courage. We've had great examples of folks executing God-given boldness, but we've also built up a cult hero following for some religious forbears that may not necessarily be accurate. This, in turn, makes resistance seem out of our reach. For example, the Reverend Emily Heath in her book "Courageous Faith" talks about Martin Luther, someone very much revered in her tradition. When he tacks the 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenburg, he is brought before the Diet of Worms. It is here where it's told he says "Here I stand, I can do none other!" in some rather brave, bold gesture. That's the tale we've been told. But Rev. Heath says that this story may have been hyperbolized over the years.

What Heath says likely happened that the leaders of the gathering brought him into the room, asked if the books and papers were his, and if they are, is he ready to renounce their heretical content. Luther asks for some time to think. Some accounts say that he spoke barely above a whisper. He doesn't answer in court until the next day, where it has been recorded that he says "If I now recant these then I would be doing nothing but strengthening tyranny. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen." But there are many varied account of how this happened. So what we have may not be a statement of an abnormally brave, fearless leader, but a story of an ordinary monk who spoke quietly, asking for God to help him. I find this comforting in a time where I feel I can barely speak above a whisper.

We look up to courageous leaders, but we often forget that they too face very real fear and trepidation. Even Christ, in the garden of Gethsemane asks that if at all possible, that the cup be taken from him. This doesn't mean that Christ wasn't

courageous, or that he was having doubts about what he was about to do, he simply had a very human reaction to a very real and pressing danger. Courage and fearlessness are actually more opposed to each other than we might think. Those who are courageous are not without fear. Fear exists for courageous people, but courageous people learn to resist the fear and not let it consume them. Courage is the ability to resist our own fear and also to resist the fear spread by others. Fearlessness gets us into trouble, and can lead us right into danger's path. Courage is simply the act of not letting ourselves be devoured by fear.

Stepping out in faith and resisting in a time of fear also means letting go of neutrality. Neutrality is safe, and it's also comfortable. We tell ourselves not to get involved, or we become apathetic, convinced we can't change anything. Therefore, we find ourselves neutral. Possibly, we wait on the sidelines to see how things will play out. However, with our baptismal vows, we vow to value others lives, to love our neighbor as ourselves, and we pledge allegiance to God and Christ. These acts take us out of a neutral zone and put us immediately on the side of justice and righteousness, rendering us no longer neutral. While it's natural to want to stay "safe," our baptism pledges our loyalty to God and to God's people and push us into being active in public discourse. It's near impossible to follow Christ and remain safe and untouchable.

Reverend Emily Heath says she likes to ask her congregation, "What would you do if you believed in God's promises enough that you would not be intimidated by the negative messages of the world?" I've been thinking a lot this week on how I might answer that question. I would like to think I would be involved with more "doing" and less talking. I'd worry less about my own financial comfort and stability and give more to those who ask of me. I'd rest more securely in God's promises and have more of a spirit of love instead of pride, anger, and resentment. I'd probably let go of things that I have no business holding. In short, I think I would live into joy.

In the Reformed tradition, John Calvin talks about the "perseverance of the saints." He wrote, "No one can travel so far that they do not make some progress each day. So let us never give up. Then we shall move forward daily in the Lord's

way. And let us never despair because of our limited success. Even though it is so much less than we would like, our labor is not wasted when today is better than yesterday!" We continue to be drawn forward by God as we strive to resist in a world that would often like to see us downcast and disheartened. It can be difficult to see the progress we make, but progress is there. Perseverance is something that is needed to resist in a time of fear. In looking at our legacy of folks who stood up to injustice and Empire, we see folks who not only did and said brave things, but we also see folks who simply persevered. In our list of heroes of the faith today, each person found a way to persevere in the face of evil and sin.

In this world, if you are in any way different from what society expects of you, or if you challenge systems that are in place, you can be seen as a threat. We cannot resist in holy ways during this time of fear and not expect pushback. The most evil and deadly parts of this world want to take away your joy, and also want you to hate yourself. The world expects you to have certain things before you can experience joy. Or the world expects you to hit a certain life stage, achieve a pre-conceived notion of vocational success, be in a heterosexual marriage, or have enough money for all the things you don't need in life. To go one's own way in the world, regardless of difference or uniqueness in one's self is an extreme act of resistance. This is an act of spiritual perseverance, maybe another version of the "perseverance of the saints" that Calvin talks about. We can opt to choose another way. We can choose to let the world tell us our value, strength, and success. Or we can choose to persevere. Courage in the face of the forces of evil isn't naive, nor does it deny the severity of the world around us. The resurrected Christ still carried the scars of his crucifixion. Christ embodied the resurrection joy, and the resistance of all that is evil in the world, yet one could still see the holes in his hands, feet, and side.

In our story in Isaiah, we are told by the prophet to not be afraid, God is with us. We are called by name. Though we go through elements like fire and water, we will not be burned or drowned. But note that we are not promised that we will not have to go through them. We will be brought from the East and the West, but that does not mean we have not yet had the feeling of separation or isolation. I believe this is meant to be a comfort during a time of action. A call to persevere,

to know whose we are in the midst of the chaos that surrounds us. This is a call to resist fear, to not let fear devour us. This is a call to rise up and to be the alternative to the greed, anger, and hate we see in the world around us.

We've resisted, as a congregation. We have not been paralyzed with fear but we've been stirred to action. With some of our members working on shutting down the plans for a detention center being built in our county, with a rummage sale to help raise funds for separated families, by being people who show up to take a stand against gun violence, we rise and we resist. And in this is joy. The author Alice Walker once said, "resistance is the secret of joy." Soon after the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, there were trauma chaplains who came to the city to be of help to victims. One chaplain noted that there was a dance party the following night in the same location that the massacre took place. And she noted that people were dancing with such joy, and in this joy there was resistance to fear. People were not letting the actions of one man dictate how they would go about living their life. What would it look like if we didn't allow the actions of one man or one woman or one small group of people dictate how we face the world?

In a previous sermon I talked about the "groundedness" and "rootedness" that comes with joy. A knowledge that one rests firmly in the love and embrace of God. We cannot do what we do, we cannot fight corporations and systems and symbols of power and Empire without having that deep connection to the One who knows us fully, who sees our heart and mind, who gives us the strength and the joy to carry out the tasks that go about bringing God's kingdom on earth.

I recently learned of the story of Nachshon, someone who was present at the parting of the Red Sea. Our Old Testament states that Moses led his people to the precipice of the Red Sea, lifted his hands, and the waters parted. Midrashic tradition, which has been handed down to rabbi after rabbi over millennia, claims that maybe things didn't quite go down in that way. In the story from the Midrash, someone named Nachshon stepped on the bank, then into the water, and continued to walk until the waters almost engulfed him. Then and only then did the waters begin to part. He almost drowned before things started to change. That name, Nachshon, has come to mean "initiator" or someone who puts

themselves on the line. The moral of that story is that change doesn't happen by standing by the shoreline or dipping a toe in. We have to wade into the water. We have to risk that feeling of being engulfed, we have to be "all in" before we can expect change to happen. We cannot turn back, because behind us is Pharoah, and all manner of things that seek to destroy us. In front of us is water, and our eventual joy and liberation that comes from crossing it and believing in God's promises. We cannot stand still, or we will be overwhelmed, we need to move forward. It's scary, and dangerous, but it's the only place we can go, knowing that God is our deliverer and sustainer, the harbinger of salvation and new life. May we have the courage to wade into the water with God at our side. Amen.