

Epiphany 1 (Year C): Jan 10, 2010 Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

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Life comes at you fast (main text: Isaiah 43).

Many of you probably remember that tag line from a series of TV commercials. My problem is that I remember the tag line but forget the product. A few minutes on the Internet told me that the commercials were for Nationwide insurance.

In my favorite of the series, a man pushes a toddler up on a swing. When the swing returns, the toddler has been transformed into a teenager. The startled dad gets knocked over by the change in weight and age.

Most of these funny ads carry a serious message. Life does come at you fast. Sometimes your life can change in an instant. Your comfortable world is shattered and you wonder if it will ever be the same. I'm sure you can think of example from your own life. Here's one from mine.

My daughter Beth had just completed her last day of kindergarten. Running around the house, she slipped and hit the back of her head on a steel radiator cover. She seemed fine except for the bump on her head. My wife and I failed, at first, to make the connection when she fell again some minutes later. As I helped my little girl of her feet, Beth said "Daddy, I can't see." She seemed more curious than worried. That's not how her mom and dad felt. We tried to remain calm as we drove Beth to her doctor. Arriving at his office, we learned that he had summoned an ambulance. Soon we were on our way to the hospital, sirens blaring. Some very strange thoughts went through my mind during that journey. I'm sure prayers were offered but they cannot be remembered. By the time we reached the emergency room, Beth had started to regain her sight. A CAT scan showed no visible injury. No treatment was necessary. The doctors wanted to keep Beth overnight and offered to let me stay in the room with her.

"Are you healthy?", one of the doctors asked me. "Yes", I said, "why do you ask?" "We've got some pretty sick kids on that floor", the doctor said, "and I'd hate to have them catch something from you. They have enough to deal with already."

Through the open door of Beth's room I could see doctors talking to the parents of these very sick children. My heart went out to them. The next day Beth and I headed home. My wife and I were relieved that we had weathered this storm. In less than 24 hours, our crisis had been resolved. I wondered about the other parents with kids on that floor. What sustained them over the months and years of caring for a very sick child? What happens when life comes at you fast but the crisis is not resolved quickly? When the storm hits and doesn't pass over?

Recently I read about a mother tending a child with multiple serious medical issues. Sometimes she would talk to her friends about being overwhelmed by all the child's needs. She appreciated all the social support given by her friends but was frustrated by some of the advice they gave. In particular she found it very unhelpful when a friend would say "God will never give you more than you can bear." These well-meant words offered little comfort.

You've probably heard that phrase. Many people think comes from the Bible. It doesn't. The closest passage comes from 1st Corinthians (10:13) where Paul states that "no testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Paul tells us that we may face difficult times but God will provide "the way out so that you may be able to endure it." God will help us get through the crisis. That's very different from a God who loads us up with hard times, stopping just short of the load that will sink us. So where do we find the truth of God's promise?

Today's passage from Isaiah is a good place to start. "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you" (43:2). This is a stirring and beautiful passage, but just what exactly is God saying here?

The first thing we see is that *God has created us*. "Thus says the Lord," proclaims Isaiah, "he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel". Each of us has been created and formed in the image of God. "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you," says God. We are created for God's glory and formed to be his servants. Each of us has an opportunity to bring glory to God by worshiping him, by loving one another and by using our energy and talents to serve the world around us. As St. Irenaeus said in the second century, "The glory of God is a human being, fully alive!"

But we don't live in a perfect world. The truth is that we live in a broken creation. We sin against God and each other, indulge our selfish desires and fall victim to the evil of others. So we need to be redeemed.

God knows this, which is why he says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine". The Lord comes to us in Jesus Christ to buy us back from captivity to sin, and rescue us from destruction and death. God's redemptive effort isn't easy; it costs God something. In Isaiah, the Lord says, "I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you". That's a stiff price, but we know now that God is willing to pay even more. He gave the life of his one and only Son on the cross.

So we are created by God and then *redeemed by God*. That's the biblical story in a nutshell. Reformer John Calvin, who was born 500 years ago, saw the Old Testament as the story of creation and the New Testament as the story of

redemption. From start to finish, the Bible speaks of a God who lives by the promise, "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". Notice, however, that the Lord *does not promise that you will never face rough waters*. Being a Christian doesn't mean cruising through life. You can still be hit by an enormous wave of illness, a cold wind of betrayal, a tidal change in the economy or a strong current of temptation. Isaiah does not guarantee that our sailing will always be smooth but instead gives us the assurance that God will be with us, and we won't be overwhelmed. No matter how rough the seas become, the Lord will protect us from being completely destroyed.

Over the skies of North Vietnam, life came fast at Navy Pilot Bill Shoemaker. Shot down and captured, Bill spent 8 years as a POW. During that time Bill's captors put him through more physical and mental torture than would seem bearable. For three years he was kept in solitary confinement, only able to communicate with other prisoners by tapping in code. Abbreviations allowed short messages to have greater meaning. "GBU" meant "God bless you". Sort of an early version of texting. Bill believes that this short messages helped him keep his sanity.

Also, to keep his mind active in the solitude, Bill would imagine the house he wanted to build when he got back home. He laid out elaborate blueprints in his imagination, counting the number of bricks and board feet of lumber he would need to complete his house. Once he had the whole picture complete, he would change the plans by moving a fireplace, requiring a revision in the drawing. Bill did come home and was able to build his dream house. His belief in the future and support from his fellow prisoners got him through most difficult of ordeals.

It might surprise you to learn that Bill's story was part of a recent PBS documentary on happiness. His story was used to illustrate resilience, the ability to recover from adversity. Many people like Bill, when asked if they could choose to erase this difficult episodes from their life, say "No". Surviving these terrible situations helped transform their lives. They had a stronger sense of purpose and better appreciation for all that life had to offer.

The great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once said, "If you are not happy with your life, you can change it in two ways: either improve the conditions in which you live, or improve your inner spiritual state. The first is not always possible, but the second is." Clearly Bill Shoemaker couldn't control his situation in captivity. We face many situations and conditions that we can't avoid. Job loss, illness, car accidents, rejection by loved ones — all are storms that sweep over us from time to time, and we can do little to control them.

But improving our inner spiritual state? That's a change that's always possible. We can pray for those who persecute us, love both God and neighbor, and work to improve the world around us. Best of all, the Lord will help us in these efforts, because God's promise is always true: "You are precious in my sight, and

honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine”