

WITH US ALL THE WAY

Isaiah 43:1-7

Matthew 10:16-20, 26-31

TEXT: Isaiah 43:5 "Do not fear, for I am with you."

PURPOSE: To encourage us to give ourselves to speaking and being the good news in full confidence that God is with us, come what may.

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The passages from scripture which we just heard were read at my ordination service forty years ago on a hot summer afternoon in New Covenant United Church of Christ in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. That service, which I admit to designing, was so long that it had an intermission during which the people in the congregation were offered cups of cold water. You can be grateful that I've learned in the years since my ordination that the spiritual value of a worship service decreases in proportion to its length.

At the time, I was driving a 1967 Dodge Dart. While I was in the church getting organized for the service, my sister, who is here today, painted "I married the church" and the logo of the United Church of Christ on the car. Because the Dart's blue paint was deteriorated to begin with, the words and logo did not wash off. It was the most unique clergy car ever. All I can say is that she's lucky to be driving a rented car this weekend.

The preacher for my ordination service was a man named Phil West. Phil had been my supervisor at my field education placement at Church of All Nations. COAN, as we called it, was an historic Neighborhood House founded by the Methodists located on the corner of Second Avenue and Houston Street in the Lower East Side of New York City. The building hosted a large day care. It had a playground on its roof. It ran programs for youth after school and in the evening. It had two full sized gyms and a swimming pool in the basement, which was empty and abandoned by the time I got there. Three congregations were worshipping there when I was involved: one speaking Polish, one speaking Spanish, and one speaking English, although, over the course of its 60-plus year mission, worship services were held in I think eleven different languages, depending on the ethnic heritage of the people living in the neighborhood at any given time.

In his sermon, Phil recalled the intense ministry we'd shared when COAN had been the victim of the convergence of a bankrupt urban renewal project, lack of commitment to the mission by the Methodist Church, and conflicted relationships with a grassroots neighborhood organization. Halfway into the second year of my time there, we abandoned the neighborhood house and reduced the ministry to the congregations. Recalling Jesus' warning that he was sending his disciples out as sheep in the midst of wolves, I guess we thought that we'd already safely made our way through a pretty

formidable pack of wolves. I was young, idealistic, full of ideas, believing that a grand career lay ahead of me. I was also falling madly in love that very weekend with a young woman whom I'd counseled at church camp who had come to celebrate my ordination. Can you guess who she was? The way forward looked incredibly bright, and Phil's sermon, titled "I will be with you," assured me that God was going to take good care of me along the way.

If we thought that the wolves were behind us back then in good old 1979, we were ridiculously naive and terribly mistaken. The world has changed enormously since then. Too many of you have heard me say that I was ordained before the invention of the cordless telephone - that would be one connected to what we now call a "land line," but it's true. But it's not merely technology that's been wolfish toward the mission of doing and being the good news of Jesus. The relationship between church and culture has undergone an entire sea change. The sad truth is that, rather than adjusting its life and work to the changes in the world around us, church folk have spent enormous amounts of energy wishing that things could be the way they were, when families were intact, when youth sports didn't play on Sundays, and when we could expect lots of people with decent paying jobs speaking our language, having our skin color, and being comfortably heterosexual lining up to get involved in our programs and activities.

Along the way, the vast majority of what we used to call mainline churches – the ones with familiar denominational labels – have experienced declines in membership, loss of financial sustainability, and most dangerously, loss of commitment to mission. "Circle the wagons!" is the call coming from so many churches. "Time to invest our resources in protecting what we have left!" And so, recalling Jesus' warnings to those first missionaries, fewer and fewer of us are 'handed over to councils, or flogged, or dragged before rulers because of our allegiance to Jesus.' For too many people who associate ourselves with Jesus, being a Christian bears little resemblance to the hazardous work Jesus said it would be.

But here we are, trying to figure out how to be his faithful followers in these terribly urgent days. Here we are, with the Spirit niggling us to want our churches to be more than safe stations. Here we are, with the Spirit implanting in us a God-sized desire urging us to re-imagine our churches as mission outposts training people for the admittedly dangerous work of speaking and being the good news in our time and place. So even if we aren't being 'handed over' – Jesus used the same phrase both to predict what would happen to his disciples on mission and to describe his arrest, flogging, and execution by religious and political authorities, we know from our insides out that

promise of the Spirit's power is being fulfilled, even now, even among us.

Phil's sermon title, "I Will be With You," was inspired by what God said through Isaiah of the Exile, "Do not fear, for I am with you." (Isaiah 43:5) I'm guessing his message was an assurance of God's presence going forward, not just with me as I began ordained ministry, but with all of us seeking to be Christ's faithful disciples. My recollection of my forty years of ministry is that God has been with me, and more, that in spite of the struggles and disappointments the Church has endured, God has been with us. My sermon's title is, "With Us All the Way." God has been with us; God is with us, God will be with us, all the way. Through it all, through the huge changes in the culture, through the challenges of being church in the midst of those changes, through the ups and downs of our personal journeys of faith, God has not forsaken us. God has not given up on us. God has not forgotten to be faithful.

Keep in mind that Jesus never said, "Go out and spread the good news. I promise you success at every turn. People will flock to you and love what you have to say." What he said was, "take up your cross and follow me." What he said was, "because of me, families will be divided and conflicted." What he said was, "you'll be even more misunderstood and maligned than I was." But he also said, "Do not be afraid. God who even knows when a sparrow falls values each of you more than many sparrows." And Isaiah of the Exile heard God say this: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Hold on to that powerful reality long past today's last hymn. It's more, and better, than God being with us. It's that we are precious in God's sight. It's that God honors us. It's that God loves us. That's how God is with us all the way.

The real question is, have we been with God? Have we allowed ourselves to be in the place where we experience ourselves as precious in God's sight? Have we been about the mission to which we have been sent, the one which is dangerous, but also, the one where we learn what it's like not to be afraid even when the situation is frightening?

This reminds me of a place, actually a relationship, where I learned what it means to be present. The original ministry to which I was ordained took place in two settings. I served as the part time pastor and teacher of St. John's UCC in McEwensville, PA, a small town about twenty five miles from my home town. I also participated in a two year long chaplaincy training program at a major medical center about twenty miles from the church. Because I was not very organized in parish work, and over committed to the chaplaincy, Lindy probably rightly accused me of working two full-time jobs.

Over the course of those two years, I provided pastoral care to almost every unit of the hospital, from the cancer ward to the intensive care unit. For a few months, I covered the pediatric unit. I have only one memory from my service there. There was a girl on that unit for most of the time I was assigned there. I'm not sure how old she was, but she definitely was pre-teen. This girl had a genetic disorder known as Von Recklinghausen's disease. What this meant was that she had tumors, really large warts like you'd imagine witches having, all over her body. She was visually hideous. It was hard to look at her without being revulsed. I wish to God I could remember her name and not the name of her disease.

Early on in my contact with her, I would work out a way to make my visits brief. But she would always say as I was trying to leave, "Won't you *stay with*? That's why I remember it— she never said, stay with *me*, just *stay with*. At first, I found excuses not to stay with. But one night I was on call for the whole hospital, which was pretty quiet overall. So I stopped up to visit her, and once again, she asked me to stay with. This time, I did. I had the pager, so if any other unit needed me, they could call. I said, yes, I will stay with. I settled into the chair by her bed. I have absolutely no recollection of whether we talked, or what happened, except for this: her inner beauty was revealed to me. She was a fragile, precious child, pure of heart, no resentment regarding her condition, just lonely. All she wanted was someone to stay with. After that night, it was easy for me to go back. Her room became a kind of sanctuary, a place set apart from the intensity of the hospital and from the expectation- at least my expectation for myself- that I do something. In that precious, isolated girl's room, God's Spirit taught me the power of just being fully present, vulnerable to another's suffering or isolation or loss, but not trying to fix it, just staying with.

This is how God wants to be with us. Not the cosmic fixer, but the holy Presence. Not one who pops in and then out of our lives, protected from our hurts, our griefs, our isolation, but the One who fully experiences our life with us. And this is the mission to which Christ continues to call his Church. It's not about numbers, or dollars, or the praise of others. It's the dangerous work of letting ourselves be present – present to people who are isolated, filled with guilt, overcome with hopelessness, burdened with oppression. It's the blessed work of being Christ to each other, of staying with, of being the good news simply by how we are with each other, by how we are his Church in this deeply damaged world. That's the call. It's a call to everyone who bears Christ's name and shares his life. It's the response we make to knowing that we are precious, honored, and beloved, and that God truly is with us all the way until we are all the way to God.