***“I Will Be with You”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, January 13, 2019

**Isaiah 43:1–7, 19**

1Now 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.

2 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. . . . 4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.

5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 6 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—7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

**Luke 3:21–23**

21 Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

23 Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this account of the baptism of Jesus by John, of the Spirit descending like a dove, and a voice saying either “*This* is my beloved Son,” or “*You* are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11). Later in Jesus’ ministry, a heavenly voice says something very similar at the Transfiguration, where Jesus becomes dazzling, and speaks with two heavenly figures (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35). The Transfiguration is witnessed only by the Peter, James, and John. So, a heavenly voice affirming the Beloved Son is heard first by John the Baptist, and then by three of Jesus’ apostles.

Now, what is there in common between these two events? I think both involve some kind of *Revelation* of the Son, but at two very different parts of his career, and to different people. First he is revealed right at the *beginning* of his career to someone who represents what went before: the prophetic tradition, embodied in John the Baptist. Then in the middle of his career, in fact, *right* at the time that Jesus had begun to speak to his apostles about his divinity, he is revealed to the representatives of the *new* apostolic tradition. It is only these two moments of the Revelation of the Son that are marked by a voice from heaven. Why? I can only think of two reasons. First, these pronouncements function as the Father’s formal confirmation of Jesus’ divinity, as though the divine Law required these announcements to be made at the *beginning* of Jesus’ ministry, before he performed any miracles, and again at that time when he had begun *talking* about his divine status. The voice from heaven is a formal seal of approval from God! It was proper that the Father should affirm the Son’s divinity, and that both Jesus and his closest co-workers would hear the pronouncement.

The other reason has to do with the needs of the disciples.I think the voice was meant to strengthen the faith of John, and then later of Peter, James, and the other John—I mean their faith in Jesus’ divinity. Wouldn’t it strengthen *your* faith in someone if you heard a voice from heaven say to that person, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And these men will benefit from faith-strengthening. John will be arrested and then killed by Herod Antipas. John needs something to hold onto while he waits in prison. Peter, James, and John will have their faith tested when Jesus is arrested and killed. They fear for their own for their lives, and they doubt their ability to preach the gospel without Jesus. All of them will demonstrate faith at key moments, including Peter, who gives an astonishingly effective speech on the day of Pentecost, leading to the baptism of three thousand people (Acts 2:41).

In a way, the heavenly voice at the baptism and the Transfiguration had a very limited and private effect on four people, yet had a huge effect on the whole Jesus movement. I think the strengthening was both for these men themselves, and for the effect they were going to have on others. God cares about each person’s faith, but God also works through the individual—especially *those* individuals—to reach others. God seeks to encourage us, individually and collectively.

We can *expect* that, at some time, we, too, will be tested, and we can expect that God will try to give us courage in that moment.

That leads me to Isaiah, the *Second* Isaiah, the prophet who spoke encouraging words to the Jews living in exile in Babylon. He has God saying“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” (43:2). Second Isaiah also is speaking to strengthen people whose faith is being tested. He utters *just* the encouraging words that they need to hear: “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, do not fear, for I am with you” (43:4–5).

The Jews are wondering if they will ever return to Judah, if their temple will ever be rebuilt, if they will ever worship in peace, and if they will have a king again. They or their children *will* return to Judah, their temple *will* be rebuilt and echo with the sounds of worship, but they will not have a king again—that is, not a *political* king. They will instead have a spiritual king, a spiritual *leader*, for which they will not quite be ready. The prophets try to prepare the Jews for a spiritual Savior who will be open to the Gentiles, even to a potential brotherhood of all humanity, but this will challenge their nationalistic tendencies.

The Second Isaiah passage does speak to the minds and hopes of the people of *that* time. What is most stressed in this passage is their hope for reunification of the scattered Jews. Second Isaiah hears God telling the north (that could be Syria and Babylon) to give up its Jewish refugees, and the south to hand over the dispersed sons and daughters of Jacob. They will return to Judah. “I am about to do a new thing,” God says, “now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (47:19).

What if God intends a new thing for us, here, in this New Year? Are we ready? Who knows what will come next for our church community, either some pleasantness or a challenging thing? There will always be something unexpected. It might seem good, or it might seem bad, but if we remember that God is with us, then it works for good. We will be able to break through to a new period if we are prayerfully present with God. “I will be with you,” God says, and we have to make that real in our experience. Whatever changes or tests we will face in this church, the real challenge is to keep alive the flame in our hearts—the flame of connectedness with God. Maybe *we* have exiles who will return to our church. Or maybe there are some who will voluntarily leave us. We have no control over most of this, but we do control whether we *trust* that God is going with us through all the waters of change. We *can* invite God more deeply into our lives.

There *will* be change, I don’t know of what *kind*, but it will surprise us, and we w

ill feel we’ve been tossed in the waters. Just maintain the *lively* connection to God, and God will do a *New Thing* among us. Churches nowadays need to be ready for a new thing, because the old ways are passing away. What the church used to mean in the community is largely gone. We have to rethink what church *is*, and what it offers. What do *we* offer the community?

*One* thing, though, is unchanging: “I have called you by name, you are mine. You are precious in my sight, and honored.” *Know* that you are honored, precious, and unique in the universe. You are invited, just as you are, to join in the procession, to commence walking with God. It’s a New Year! Let’s have a new liveliness in our walk with God!