

SURELY IT IS GOD WHO SAVES ME;  
TRUSTING HIM I SHALL NOT FEAR

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“Surely it is God who saves me; trusting him I shall not fear. For the Lord defends and shields us and his saving help is near.” That is how the hymn setting of the First Song of Isaiah our canticle for today begins. I have found myself singing that in my head all week long. Why? It is my response to the news of the day. The ugliness we see today is all based on fear and that goes for all sides in this dark and ugly world as we approach the birth of Jesus once again.

Fear is driving our political debate and worldview and fear is the opposite of faith. Fear causes good people to turn on others because their belief system is different. This fear causes people to act in horrible ways. There was a story in the Washington Post this week about 5 servicemen who have all been the targets of abuse because of their faith. One came from the Bosnia, where he fled persecution. He had to carry a card that identified him as a Muslim and was forced to wear an armband that proclaimed his faith. On arriving in this country he enlisted in the Marines and has served 8 tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He wonders what happened to the America he immigrated to. The antidote to this fear and hate of other is faith and trust in God.

Today's gospel passage builds on last week with John's proclaiming the coming of Christ. This week though the emphasis is not on Jesus, but on us. John the Baptist speaks not just to the leaders as he did in Matthew, but this is addressed to the entire crowd.

John's call to action is a call to show our baptism by our actions. This is a great challenge for us today, for it is getting harder and harder to act like a follower of the Jesus movement. It is getting harder and harder to follow the Prince of Peace who was totally non-violent in our violent world. It becomes even more difficult when we let fear win.

So what are we to do, what is the example that we can follow and that we can show to the world to counter the vitriol that passes for political discourse? Well John does have an answer and many in the crowd did not like it then and I suspect many today will find it just as hard to swallow. His call is to live an ethical moral life regardless of what others do around you. The call is to live a life where people will know you are a Christian by our thoughts, words and deeds.

This call to faithful living is in part why I selected the Eucharistic Prayer and the Prayers of the People for this Advent season. Advent is a season of preparation and this liturgy

is one that should help us prepare to be the kind of faithful people John is calling us to be.

I have a book on my shelf from seminary that is entitled "Praying shapes believing." This text was used in my liturgy class and takes the premise that how we pray both reflects our beliefs but also shapes our beliefs. So what am I hoping to shape in you and your beliefs by using this service?

Today I want to focus on the prayers of the people which I found while up in Bethesda for my Network of Biblical Storytellers conference when I visited St. Johns Norwood where a classmate of mine is the Associate Rector. To begin with the opening prayer: *Friend in Christ, God invites us to hold the needs of our sisters and brothers as dear to us as our own needs. Loving our neighbors as ourselves, we offer our thanksgivings and Petitions on behalf of the church and the world.*

John calls us to feed the hungry, make sure others are clothed, do not cheat or take advantage of others. Why? Because we are to treat our neighbors as ourselves and Jesus will very clearly tell us who our neighbors are. It is our actions and our thoughts that tell people that we are faithful Christians. So these prayers are prefaced by a statement that tells us for whom we are called to show concern and care. That simply is for everyone because Jesus teaches us that everyone is our neighbor.

Then take the time to notice that each prayer also contains an attribute, a characteristic of God or we could also insert Jesus into any of these responses.

God is described as Loving, redeeming, protector, healer, source of hope, and provider. There is no fear or violence in any of these descriptions. The prayers contain calls for justice, mercy, liberty, and unity. We pray for those afflicted by any of the ills of the world.

Redeeming Sustainer, visit your people and pour out your strength and courage upon us, that we may hurry to make you welcome not only in our concern for other, but by serving them generously and faithfully in your name.

I have also added into this set of prayers the Prayer of St. Francis. This prayer is one that is the perfect antidote for what ails our world.

### **A Prayer Attributed to St. Francis**

Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love. For it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen.

Do any of you realize how radical a prayer this is? First of all in our “me” centered culture the focus is totally on others except that living this prayer is the best way for us as well. This is all about putting our false self, our ego self as Richard Rohr calls it aside. It is in doing this that we move to discover and embrace our true self, the one that is focused on God and shows God’s love to the world without fear. So by approaching the world with this attitude we in turn will find peace in our own life.

Finally what do we do about those who are obviously enemies? Friday in the Daily Morning Prayer that I do the prayer of enemies was included.

O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Yes peaceful Muslims must stand up to the violent factions of their faith, but we have our share of violent hate filled people who profess to be members of our faith. We must also show the world that these people do not represent Christianity. The way is both simple and hard. We have prayers that show us what to do the instructions are there, that is the easy part. The doing that is the hard part.