

ISAIAH 43:1-4a

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. 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. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you.

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which have been called, with all gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all and through all and in all.

THE TEST

Isaiah 4:1-4a
Ephesians 6:1-6

Halloween is upon us and there is a lot of scary stuff going on! Globally we are living in what may ultimately be regarded as the most consequential in the history of human health. That's pretty scary! We are dealing with unprecedented heat waves in the summer, hurricanes and floods, wildfires, unprecedented gun violence, the Delta variance, strong uptakes in attacks against immigrants... Boo! All of these scary events make me wonder if we are being Tested.

I hate to be a pessimist, but it is Halloween and I fear things will likely get worse before

they get better—and hopefully they will. But our culture wars guarantee that we will see even darker days ahead as extremist factions on both the left and the right together with social media campaigns of disinformation keep us stuck in a ditch. And even though the pandemic is easing up here, there are billions of global citizens, particularly in Africa, who have had extremely limited access to vaccines which we predictably give rise to new variances stretching out the overall pandemic for perhaps years to come. It isn't over for us until it's over everywhere.

But the rapid changing climate is really the scariest event because it affects so many so profoundly. For there will continue to be more deadly storms like Ida while drought in the west dries up critical water resources. There will be millions more square miles, homes and towns destroyed in uncontrollable blazes. Vast stretches of the earth will gradually become uninhabitable leading to mass migration. Even though it is Halloween, let us not put on masks and pretend we don't see all this. While the pandemic will ultimately be eradicated, The greatest long term threat to the world community is indeed climate change. In fact, both NPR and the Wall Street Journal recently published editorials warning us of this. It is not a partisan issue. Author and law professor, James Gustave Speth, lays out the issue when he writes: "I used to think that top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these, we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientist don't know how to do that."

There it is...that's The Test we are facing. It is a crisis of values and community participation in sacrificing our egoistic needs for the good of our world and for future generations. But we aren't very good at sacrificing. And yet, in spite of the fact that we are angry with each other and don't get along, we are compelled to act together in order to accomplish anything. There is a Jewish fable about a good king who is dying. He asks for his weakest subject to bring him an arrow and break it. He does so easily. He then requested a bundle of arrows to be brought to him. He asks his strongest subject to break it; he can't. The

king then tells his subjects to remain united as this will give them the strength they do not have alone.

It is exactly what Paul is encouraging the Ephesians to do in our scripture. *I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all gentleness and patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.* He is begging them! It is that important.

What concerns me is that we are failing in our efforts to transform the world into a place that is less scary while being safe and secure for everyone. And we can point fingers all we want, but does it accomplish? The bottom line is we need God's help. We cannot do this alone. It is all well and good to send our thoughts and prayers to those who are being victimized by climate disasters, poverty, economic policies heavily favoring those already at the top of the ladder, and politicians who care only for their self-interests to the exclusion of the country's needs. But those suffering require more than thoughts and prayers. Thinking and praying don't let us off the hook. We are called to action.

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, "Pastor, you're right. We know you are. But if God were so concerned about all this, why doesn't God do something?" It's a fair question and one that's been asked by many people for eons. "Where is God? Why does God let this happen?" Have we flunked The Test and this is our punishment?

These are important questions. And if you critically read your Bible, you understand that God never guaranteed us a life without suffering. Remember we were booted from the Garden for our lack of obedience. No Paradise for us! And in our scripture from Isaiah, it is clear that God does not protect us from scary stuff and we will have to *pass through waters and walk through fires*. God did not save the Hebrews from bondage in Babylon; Jesus was crucified; and eleven of his twelve disciples were tortured and executed, as was Paul.

So then what does God do for us, you might ask? Why do I bother believing? There is a missing link here, isn't there? This is what I suspect it is—and it is the theological

understanding I have arrived at. Look at the big picture. Go back to the beginning in Genesis. God created us after God's own image meaning that each one of us is a miracle in our own right who has built right into us the capacity to go to the moon, build bridges, internet platforms...the internet itself. Our accomplishments and potential are unlimited. The conclusion to Isaiah's message is an affirmation that in spite of the scary stuff God is always present and available: *Because you are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you.* God was working behind the scenes to help the diaspora negotiate their release from slavery. God did not save them from bondage—they deserved it—but God did help them get out.

We cannot go it alone. Marianne Williamson said, "You can let the same force that makes flowers grow and planets move run your life, or you can do it yourself." It sounds pretty simple, doesn't it? But how often have we decided to go it alone and later realized we had made a big mistake. When we invite God into our lives, everything changes. We have a power working for us in ways we cannot imagine. All we need to do is say, "Okay, I'm ready to team up."

The Test before us has been handed out. Can we work together in our unity in the Spirit to begin undoing the messes we have created? God has given us every tool we need to dig ourselves out, but God will not do it for us. So let us get out our shovels and dig together because the future of the world depends upon it.

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