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“The Power of Affirmation”

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The Baptism of the Lord (Year C)

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Isaiah 43:1–7; Psalm 29; Luke 3:15–22

The concept of “cliff” has been on my mind lately. I wonder why?

With all of the media banter about Congress and their last-minute dealings
with the great fiscal cliff,

we must have heard or read the word “cliff” at least ten times a day.

On one hand, it's frightening because a cliff represents a precipice, a jumping-off point,
a falling away of solid ground, a risk of injury or even death—all of which are
frightening concepts.

On the other hand, my father's name was Cliff, and every time I have heard

that word lately, it takes me back to fond memories of the funny things he said,

or the games he played with us, or the jokes he used to tell that made us laugh.

But once the proliferation of “cliffs” began, I couldn't help but notice them everywhere!

Israel, in today's reading from Isaiah, stands on the *cliff of extinction*

as a direct result of her arrogance and disobedience of Yahweh/God

and her ensuing exile in Babylon.

Israel is a conquered people, her children either having been killed in combat

or whisked away to live under the oppressive regime of an alien culture.

Because her people are scattered, Israel probably does not realize

how dangerously close to the cliff of extinction she is.

Her toes are on the edge of the precipice, and she is inches from becoming “not a people.”

Because Israel realizes that Yahweh God has handed her over to the Babylonians

“as loot, as plunder” (Isaiah 42:22) for the punishment of her sins,
she feels, perhaps, that God has abandoned her forever.

She stands teary-eyed before God's burning anger

and wonders as if she is not only on the brink of “not a people,”
but also on the brink of “no longer the people of God.”

Jesus also teeters terribly close to a cliff at the young age of 30,
although he, perhaps, does not realize it either.

His cousin, his mentor, his exemplar, his role model, John the Baptist, has just been
locked away in prison by Herod, whom John has dared to oppose.

Will the One who is coming, the One who is greater even than John
the One who will baptize in a totally different way – with Spirit and fire –
will he ever arrive if his beloved predecessor is imprisoned?

Will the wilderness ministry of repentance for the forgiveness of sins
that has drawn thousands beyond the margins of civilization for a breath of new life
ever make it off the ground without the inspiration of its
founding father and charismatic leader, John?

And of course, we, the omniscient readers 2000 years hence, know who lurks
on the other side of the flowing baptismal waters of the Jordan:
Satan, the tempter, the one who embodies the desire to derail
the whole venture before Jesus even dries off.

Jesus teeters between the steep cliff of failure to launch, on one hand,
and the equally steep cliff of temptation to flee the fledgling ministry,
on the other hand.

The banks of the Jordan seem steep either way, be one coming in, our going out.

In 1964, a 19-year-old songwriter named P.F. Sloan wrote a song called
“Eve of Destruction.”

The song was about a number of issues – cliffs – that had been
bothering Sloan in the '60s that he considered unbearable
and confessed to writing the song as a prayer to God for an answer.

He said he felt it was a love song and written as a prayer
to cure the illnesses of our culture.

"You can't cure an ill unless you know what is sick," Sloan said.

Barry McGuire recorded the song in 1965, and the song was panned by the media
as being frightening to children

and as a symbol of everything that is wrong with the youth of the day.

Sloan was banned from performing the song on any of the national television channels,
and any admission of appreciation for the song was considered "unpatriotic."

(Eve of Destruction by Barry McGuire on songfacts.com, <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=799>)

And of course, Bob Dylan recorded the song later, after some of the initial *heat* died down.

The heat was about naming the cliffs of the '60's:

*The eastern world, it is explodin',
Violence flarin', bullets loadin',
You're old enough to kill but not for votin',
You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin',
And even the Jordan river has bodies floatin',
But you tell me over and over and over again my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.*

*Yeah, my blood's so mad, feels like coagulatin',
I'm sittin' here, just contemplatin',
I can't twist the truth, it knows no regulation,
Handful of Senators don't pass legislation,
And marches alone can't bring integration,
When human respect is disintegratin',
This whole crazy world is just too frustratin',
And you tell me over and over and over again my friend,
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction.*

(PF Sloan. *Eve of Destruction*, v. 1 &3, 1965)

The issues sound contemporary, don't they: trouble in the Middle East, gun violence,

Senators not passing legislation, voting rights, lack of integration and human respect.

What are our cliffs today, I wonder?

Well, there's the fiscal cliff, obviously, which has been temporarily averted.

There's the cliff of escalating gun violence, which recently took the lives of 20 beautiful, innocent children in Newtown, Connecticut.

There's the cliff of public education, which seems to be sliding down a slippery slope towards resegregation and privatization, just to name a few.

And then there are personal cliffs that each of us faces on any day:

the cliff of losing a spouse, of losing a child, of losing a spouse and a child, and still trying to hold together as a family;

the cliff of losing a job, which means losing benefits, which means any sickness can lead to financial disaster;

the cliff of retirement;

the cliff of stepping off of good health into illness...

you get the pattern.

A minister friend of mine showed up at a meeting last Wednesday on crutches.

"Oh, what happened to you?" I asked.

"I did like Chevy Chase on *Christmas Vacation*," he replied.

"I was up in the attic looking for something, and I fell through the flooring, tearing my meniscus.

Then when I went to be screened for an MRI, they found I still had some metal in my eye from a previous injury.

So now I have to have eye surgery on Monday to remove the metal shaving so I can have an MRI on my knee and schedule that surgery to repair it.

I feel like I've stepped off a cliff!"

He said it. I didn't have to prompt him.

Just when we think we have our toes to the edge of a precipice

with an anvil tied around our ankle like Wiley Coyote,

just when we feel like a daredevil about to go over the edge of

Niagara Falls in a barrel,
just when Israel thinks that her nationhood truly is the eve of destruction,
just when Jesus thinks that he's going to bear the weight of his ministry alone,
the voice of God breaks in, piercing the silence,
vibrating the hammer, anvil and stirrup,
sending good vibrations of glad tidings via the brain into the hearts of hearers:
"I have not abandoned you. I have called you by name. You are mine."
Out of the silence of despair and helplessness, God speaks tender words of affirmation.
To Israel, God speaks using intimate "I" and "Thou" language:

"I have called you. I will be with you. I give... for you.

I will bring your offspring. I created. I formed. I love you. I am with you."

There is no mistaking an intimate "I" and "Thou" bond, perhaps forgotten, but not forsaken.

In case Israel has forgotten who formed, named, and claimed her

in covenant relationship, God reminds Israel that she is a people precious,
honored, and valued by God.

She is worthy to be redeemed by God, worthy enough that God will give nations
in exchange for her life.

Israel's true identity is confirmed at a time of her dire confusion.

Israel has been called to be God's *forever family*, possessed and protected by God.

To a people threatened of becoming unmoored, unattached, unsecured
by the chaos of flood, fire, unfaithfulness, disease, or death,

God's voice casts a lifeline of anchoring words:

"You are precious; you belong to me."

To Jesus, the voice of God comes as a result of baptism and prayer:

baptism, which connects him to the average person;

prayer which connects him to God,

the golden triad of self, neighbor and God complete.

Then are the heavens pried opened, and the voice of God descends on the

wings of Holy Spirit dove and speaks to Jesus and is overheard by others, perhaps.

The words of God to Jesus are much more succinct than God's words to Israel,

but they are of the same ilk: "You belong to me. You are precious. You please me."
God speaks to Israel with strong "I" statements.

God speaks to Jesus with equally strong "you" statements.
But the "I" and "Thou" bond is the same.
God's claim on Jesus is affirmed on the brink of his nascent ministry.

In the beginning of his ministry is the Word.
The cliffs still loom large, for Israel and for Jesus, but larger still looms the word of the Lord,
promising presence, promising favor, promising protection, promising renewal.
The unspoken word of the Lord to Jesus is "fear not." The spoken word is "I am."

Two personal thoughts on these things.

One is that I might have heard the word of the Lord only once.

And even then, I can't imagine why God would speak to me personally
or why God would speak to me in English.

But once, when I was on a cliff of great magnitude, practicing some pretty self-destructive
behavior, the word of the Lord came to me in church, of all places,
speaking only one word, and that word was "worthy."

What that actually meant, I don't know.

What I interpreted it to mean was that I was worthy as a person,
not because of anything that I had done or not done, but because
Christ had conferred worth upon me.

And I stepped back from the cliff of self-destructive behavior.

And I have never forgotten that one word. It will stay with me forever.

Secondly, I was watching a Christmas special this year that aired on December 19th
which featured the country music group Rascal Flatts.

The music was fine, but the ancillary focus of the special was about adoption
and featured the voices of children and teens speaking about the experience
of being claimed by adoptive families.

The terminology the children used for that experience was
"being called into a *forever family*."

And I cried through the whole Christmas special
because I found it to be such a profound metaphor for baptism
by which God seals our adoption into God's *forever family*,
the household of faith, based upon the person of Jesus Christ.

That is what we celebrate today as we come to the font
to renew God's baptismal claim upon us,
our inclusion into the wide embrace of God's *forever family*
based upon the person of Jesus Christ.

Cyril, the bishop of Jerusalem in the 4th century, gives one of the earliest accounts
of baptism in the ancient church.

The ceremony would take place in the pre-dawn darkness of Easter Sunday
after six weeks of preparation, fasting, prayer and instruction.

Baptismal candidates would line up outside the church, facing westward,
towards the realm of sunset and death.

Then they would renounce evil, and turn around, as in a conversion, towards the east
to face the coming dawn, the new life, and the pristine innocence of Eden.

Processing into the church, they would discard their clothes, symbolic of their old lives,
and as they stood naked, like Adam and Eve, they would be plunged
three times into the waters of the baptismal pool.

Each time they were immersed, the bishop would ask them:

"Do you have faith in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit?"

And each time the candidates would respond, "I have faith:

I give my heart, my loyalty, my commitment."

Upon emerging from the baptismal waters, they would be clothed in white garments
to signify their new identity, receive the Eucharist for the first time

and, like Christ at his own baptism, were ritually adopted as "sons of God."

(Karen Armstrong. *The Case For God*, p. 97-98)

This was initiation into the *forever family* of God in its earliest form.

This is what we re-enact today as we repeat our vows, come towards the font,

touch the baptismal waters, and turn around to return.

We'll let you keep your clothes on this time!

We may hear the voice of the Lord, or we may not, as we own our cliffs.

But we will hear echoes across the water of the voice of the Lord,

affirming Israel of her identity and worth as the whole people of God

and affirming Jesus of his identity and worth as beloved so

and eye-apple of great pleasure

as we reaffirm our faith in the One who has called us, named us

and adopted us into God's *forever family*. Amen.