

**Isaiah 43: 1-7**  
**Luke 3: 15-22**  
**January 10, 2016**  
**Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church**  
**First Sunday of Epiphany**

One of the many criticisms of institutional religion which you may have heard goes like this: “Religion is for people who are trying to avoid hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there.” Like many such sayings which are spoken with such confidence there is an element of truth to this. There are indeed people who participate in intentional spiritual communities who do so because they are looking to be protected from suffering in this life and the next. I’m sure there must be, anyway because so many people say that it is so. I just happen not to know any of them.

The main thing that people who utter this axiom have in common, in my experience is this: *they aren’t part of these “religious” groups.* They assume that we come here week after week because we are running away from reality. We are looking for spiritual life insurance which will protect us and those we love from the imagined terrors of eternal torment. They see us as intellectually impaired people who use the idea of heaven as a spiritual pain killer to ease the suffering of the real world. In this they share the judgments of secular folk who have undergone the fires of disillusionment and have emerged with the liberating realization that there is no God or ultimate purpose to the universe.

It is no use arguing with this point of view. But on this the day when we remember the baptism of Jesus I want to suggest what we already know—that religion as most faithful people practice it, is anything *but* a spiritual sedative. It is anything *but* an attempt to escape reality.

Participating in organized religious communities is anything *but* a childish attempt to avoid hell; however these people may think we imagine it.

Rather it has been the historic purpose of the *true* practice of religion to *empower* human beings to recognize and courageously enter times of suffering. The people I know who participate in intentional spiritual communities (aka churches, synagogues, assemblies of Muslims, Hindus) seek to grow through suffering. We look to the practice of our faith to allow us to experience the entire spectrum of human experience with endurance, character, hope and yes, even joy. Do we look forward to the life after this life? Yes, indeed! Do we anticipate that the life beyond this life will be one of release from all that keeps us from the full experience of the life of God? Certainly! But does our religion teach us not to live fully in this life? Are we taught simply to endure the suffering of earthly existence until the good stuff happens? Are we stuck in the middle row of a bad movie with no escape and so close our eyes and stick our fingers in our ears until it is over?

I am sure that there are religions that teach this. I just have not met faithful people of whatever religion who believe this or live their lives this way.

I cannot speak about other religions with authority. But I have had some experience practicing the Christian faith. I can tell you that at every point in my life Christianity has taught me to face my problems and seek God's help. At every point in my life, the Christian religion has taught me to engage the human community with faith, hope and love. At every point in my life Christianity has led me to extend the ministry of Jesus Christ into the world, not to escape it. Indeed, the religion of Christianity has taught me that if I cannot recognize heaven in this life I may not recognize it in the life to come.

In short, among the many reasons I am a Christian is simply because it teaches me to be realistic about the suffering and sin of life. It teaches me not to be shocked when tragedy happens and to blame God for human suffering. My religion teaches me to look into my own heart for the source of my suffering and sin. I am taught to take responsibility for my own failure to honor God in all things and to love my fellow humans as God loves them.

Yet I am a Christian for a bigger reason than this clear eyed unsentimental view of the world. I am a Christian because my religion teaches me that God has a path which redeems this suffering and sin. God has made a way to live this life in the midst of sorrow, disappointment, grief and fear which points to hope and not despair. God has acted to open the eyes of my soul in such a way that I actually experience *God's power in the midst of pain and suffering.*

Listen again to these words from Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fires, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

God through Isaiah assures the people that if they follow his path they will pass through raging flood waters. *But they will not drown!* If they follow God's path they will have to pass through raging firestorms, *but they will not be consumed!* Why? Because, God says, *"I will be with you."*

Now, the reason I am a Christian and not a Jew or a part of any other religion is this: For me the path is not a "what" but a "who." I need a personal guide through life. I need someone I can relate to and one who I believe understands and accepts me for who I am. I was brought up by parents who were religious and who brought me to a church which taught me that the person I was looking for was a man named Jesus. This Jesus, I was taught, was the complete

expression of a loving God. I was taught that if I ever felt lost or afraid, all I had to do was to come to Jesus who would show me the way. I was taught to trust Jesus because, as the Bible said, he shared everything a human being could possibly experience *including my sin and suffering*. Indeed he even went to the length of going to John the Baptist to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins he did not have. I was taught that he accepted the baptism for the forgiveness of *my sins*.

Friends, can you let your religion teach you to accept this amazing thought? Can you open your heart to the idea that Jesus entered into the waters of the Jordan River to receive forgiveness for *your sins*?

But more than this, can you accept the fact that when Jesus emerged from the water your sins and mine were floating downstream? What else can it mean when the Holy Spirit descending as a dove of peace alights upon Jesus and we hear God say, "You are my Son. I love you. You have accomplished my purpose and I am pleased with you."

I wandered from what my church taught me. I have forgotten about Jesus. Indeed, I believe that called me to the ministry to force me to remember him for my own salvation, if not for yours. But what my church taught me as a child has always called me back. Like the father of the prodigal son, I have always been looked for and welcomed home. It is this much maligned organized religion which has kept the doors of these institutions called churches open so that I, and people like me, could get reconnected to the love that I was born with.

Religion for me any way is hardly a way of avoiding hell. It is the way God has provided for me to find God in the midst of hell and experience instead the joy of heaven. Amen.