

Isaiah 43:16-21 ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, ¹⁷ who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: ¹⁸ "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. ¹⁹ Behold, I am doing 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. ²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches, for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, ²¹ the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.

“Formed to Praise”

This past Thursday I conducted worship over at the two nursing home communities in Bolton and I spoke about the last verse of our reading from Isaiah where God describes his chosen people as, “the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.” The verse entails that God has created us with a purpose that of declaring his praise. Well, I shouldn’t presume that to know what goes on in the human will of people who’ve lost their health and home to the harsh reality of human aging. But, I would presume that the question of purpose comes up. “What is my purpose? Why am I still here?”

Well, one of the basics of biblical faith is that God has created us for a purpose, so what is it. Back in seminary when my theology professor began to talk about this subject he would preface it with talking about his golden retriever. A retriever is most fully alive and fulfilling its created purpose when it is running in a field, tongue flapping, going to get something to bring it back. I thought that was a bit of a nostalgic illustration until Dana showed up with Cedar. Cedar lives to retrieve. It’s what she does. Earlier this past week some kids who were visiting next door threw for her literally for hours. She never seemed to tire and approached each throw with the same intensity. That evening she could not get off the couch. There is only one thing that makes Cedar happier than that. That’s fetching something out of the water. As a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever retrieving stuff from the water is Cedar’s reason to be, no question.

Well, that’s a dog. They aren’t as self-reflective as human beings. If Cedar isn’t retrieving she will wait, albeit impatiently for someone to throw something for her...or chase a squirrel. As humans we are a bit different. Purposelessness can and does plague us so the question comes up of how we find purpose?” More specifically, “what is God’s purpose for me?” Back in the late ‘80’s and 90’s when the economy was strong you could do just about anything you wanted and make money at it. You heard people saying, “I’m doing what I love doing and getting paid for it.” Guidance counsellors advised the young to find what it is they really enjoy doing and pursue it. (I couldn’t understand that advice. When I was a teen I enjoyed picking my nose and admiring its produce as much as anything. But, hey, that’s just me.) Pastors then were preaching the same thing when talking about calling saying simply your calling is going to be where your greatest joy is.

That advice is straight up hedonism – if it feels good, do it. The biblical approach is to discover your spiritual gifts with which God has gifted you and listen for a way to use them. Moreover, if we take Paul’s reflections on his life there in Philippians as having authority with respect to our own, there is a higher calling on us than just doing what I enjoy and calling it my purpose. (Don’t get me wrong. Doing what you don’t enjoy is definitely a living hell and definitely not one’s purpose.) Paul, in prison reflecting on his life says: “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish (The Greek is *skubala* and is more correctly translated as sh.t), that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through the faith/faithfulness of Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith/faithfulness. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” The Trinity’s intervention into this fallen Creation, into our fallen humanity as Jesus Christ sets us looking in a different direction than just making the most out of what’s hear, than just doing my best and reaping the reward, than even just being truly altruistic until it hurts. Paul sees the higher goal as knowing Christ. Unfortunately in this fallen world knowing Christ is also knowing the fellowship (communion with him) of sharing in his sufferings. That said, it is also to know the power of his resurrection. You see, the same Holy Spirit that is with him and the Father is with and in us bringing forth new life in and through us. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us from the dead, and yet is presently at work in us transforming us each into the image of Christ and this fellowship into a loving community in the image of the loving communion of the Trinity – persons who mutually give themselves to each other in sacrificial love without reserve. Mary the sister of Lazarus breaking the bottle of very expensive perfume on Jesus feet after washing them with her tears and drying them with her hair simply because she truly understood that he was going to have to die. Something none of the others could fathom. To know Christ is to know he gave his life for us and so we give ours in grateful thanks not to live according to standards which conform to this world, but letting ourselves be transformed in the renewing work of the Holy Spirit who is in us working to turn us to see Jesus crucified for us. For, it is not until we have seen him crucified that we will know him resurrected. Our purpose is found in knowing Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings.

I need to switch gears for a moment and approach this from a different angle. There with the folks in the nursing homes I thought that there might be some there who were subjected to the misery of having to memorize the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith. So, anybody know the first question and answer to that catechism? “What is the chief end of man? The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy him for ever.” There is an older

version of that answer that says "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God and fully to enjoy him forever." Our purpose is to worship and enjoy fully God. Isaiah said as much saying God has formed us, his chosen ones, to declare his praise. God has chosen us each and been at work in each of our lives to bring forth worship from us that we might proclaim his praise to others. You may be thinking, "Uh Randy, quite honestly, the last time I was at church for worship I didn't feel the joy. I like being here and being with the people but fully enjoying God and actually worshipping I didn't get that and I don't get that." What do we mean when we talk about worship and particularly about the Trinity being at work in our lives to bring forth praise that we might declare it?

Well, this will be about the fifth time I've told this, but you all know that I had been through quite a bit before I came up, divorce and having to wait with no income while the call came together. I was thirty-seven and struggling with whether I was going to be single the rest of my life and coming to grips with knowing that I would probably never know the joy of children much less a relationship where I was loved for who I am. Well before my eyes and before yours God, our Creator, the Holy one of Israel did something new for me and these things I feared I would not know I do know now. In the Fall after William was born I was getting ready for a run and stretching on the living room floor. I looked out the window to check out the cloud situation and I heard it. It was if I heard a voice say, "Look where I've brought you." That moment the Lord met me in the steadfast love and faithfulness of God the Father and lifted up worship from me. Still it lives on.

Apart from Jesus death on the cross and him sharing his resurrection life with me by the gift of the Holy Spirit I never would have been able to hear that voice or feel the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father who lifted forth praise from me that I might declare it to others. The Triune God of Grace is at work in each of our lives forming us for the purpose of being able to declare God's praise. To speak frankly, I find it very difficult to tell others what God has done for them in, through, and as Jesus Christ – his life, his death, his resurrection. Yet, I find it very easy to share the word of praise that God has given me. In fact, without that word of praise we cannot begin to understand what Jesus' death was all about for it too was an act of worship, an act of God's steadfast love and faithfulness meant to lift forth praise from us fulfilling the purpose for which we he created us. Receiving God's love and gratefully living forth from it is our purpose. Amen.