

Pastor Speaks

Rev. Dr. Hugh Hamilton's Sermon at Bishop's Convocation

Indestructible

*Speak O Lord, your word to us, speak so that the words of my mouth
and the meditation of our hearts would be acceptable in your sight oh God
- Isaiah 43:1b-3a*



Sermon by Rev. Dr. Hugh Hamilton
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Destructible Fires

If you have been living in America over the last year or so, you know something about floods and how devastating their impact can be (literally). And if you don't, you can ask people in Texas or Florida or wherever a hurricane touched last year.

If you have been living in America, even for the last 12 months, you know something about fires and how destructible they can be – literally. And if you don't, you can ask the people in California. And figuratively, if you have been in ministry even for a brief time, you know something about floods. Who has not felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what has to be done? Who has not been through the fires of the administrative stress, of making disciples, ordering the life of the congregation, taking care of the church's property, balancing the budget and making sure the apportionments are paid, making sure parishioners feel cared for, the bereaved are comforted, you are patient with the rudeness of the defiant and the destructive, and you are still relevant and fresh and inspiring when you get into that pulpit on a Sunday morning or as often as you have to get into it?

On the wall of a mechanic shop one day while waiting for my car, I saw the quotation: "We the willing have to work with the unwilling to do the impossible for the ungrateful. We have done so much with so little for so long that we are now qualified to do anything with nothing." (I hope you don't think that I am reading your job description). The quotation goes on but I will stop there. I couldn't memorize the whole thing but it was a statement from those mechanics about how difficult their work was; having to deal with the public.

So on collecting my car, I paid for the work willingly and expressed my profoundest gratitude.

If we are absolutely honest with ourselves perhaps we might admit that the quotation on the wall of the mechanic shop, on some of the down days in ministry, comes a lot closer to describing our work than the job description the bishop gave you on the day of your ordination. And perhaps, on some of those down days, we could even name some people in our congregation who feel that we are qualified to do anything with nothing. After all, you are the pastors.

And who has not felt like they are going through the fire? In fact, some people where you are might see it as their divine call to start fires. And some fires are easy to put out, but some you have to walk through. Some fires are the malicious makings of others, but some fires come out of the truth of having to share in the human experience and you have to walk through them. I find that the words of our text are especially relevant for us and what we do. Read Isiah 43:1b-3a.

The Context of the Text: Isaiah 43

These words were written some time in the middle of the Sixth Century BC for the benefit of exiled people who understood something about suffering. These words spoke of God being with others as they go through adversity in the present or in the future. These words came in the section of the book that scholars call second Isiah, Chapters 40 – 55. This section of the

book is full of words of hope, first for the exiled people of Judah looking to rebuild a future but which can also, with caution, be applied to all God's people anywhere who understand something about suffering. It is in this same section of the book that we find the often quoted words, "no weapon fashioned against you shall prosper"; Isaiah 54:17. So you too have been making good use of these comforting words.

God's Indestructible, Redeeming Grace

Since God has called you God's own and since God has promised that fire or flood won't destroy you, you are really indestructible. The redeeming grace of the one who says you are mine has placed some God stuff in you. No wonder people think that you are qualified to do anything with nothing. Because you are spirit people, inside you there is spirit and all around you there is spirit. No wonder you have done so much with so little for so long because you are spirit people. No wonder you have been through so much and you still keep going because you are not ordinary. You are spirit people. You face unimaginable odds and still conquer because greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. John 4:4. With God's presence in you and all around you, you possess a power that is greater than any opposition you face presently or any foe you shall face in the future. No flood and no fire can take you out. God in this text was saying to these people, notwithstanding your past failures and present pain, with me you are ready to face the future victoriously.

"With God's presence in you and all around you, you possess a power that is greater than any opposition you face presently or any foe you shall face in the future."

Therefore we can assert the following as we face the future:

- (1) Be persistent in a good cause even in the face of past failures.** They had known failure, it is part of the reason they had suffered so much. Failure, moral and otherwise, brings its own suffering but failure is never the final answer for God's people. The story is told of what Sir Edmund Hillary, New Zealand born mountain climber had to say after several unsuccessful attempts at climbing Mount Everest. After one of those failed attempts, he stood at the base of the mountain and shook his fist at it saying "I will defeat you yet, you are as big as you are going to get but I'm still growing." He had learnt something from every failure that put him in a better position for the next challenge. With God on our side we cannot be taken by the flood of past failure.
- (2) Refuse to be paralyzed in your present ministry by uncertainties about the future.** The people who got this message had an existence that was characterized by loss. They had lost so much; homeland, identity, family, friends, neighbors and structure – the future was uncertain. Some of us are worried about what our church will look like after February 23. It is easy to let paralysis set in in our present ministry; sitting and just do nothing and wait to see what will happen. Whatever happens, God will still be here and God will still be savior of God's church. Whatever happens then, be faithful in doing your work now.

The same one who said upon this rock I build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it is still going to be the head of the church no matter what happens. So do not worry. Just be faithful.

Illustration on death story. Do not let the fires of fear and worry steel the joy of your present **ministry**.

- (3) Finally, counter every negative with a positive.** It is easy to sink into negativity and one way to counter that is to celebrate the good things that are happening. These people had been through a lot of trauma but King Cyrus was going to let them go home. They could celebrate that. In the summer of 585 BC when the Babylonians invaded Judah they took the King Zedekiah and let him watch them execute his two sons – 2 Kings 25:7. Then they gouge his eyes out so that the last living memory he would have of seeing was the execution of his children. There were still people alive who had witnessed trauma of this magnitude among the people to this writing was addressed initially. We too have experienced trauma. Some of it is our own trauma and some of it the trauma on the lives of the people we minister to. But we can thank God that our eyes are not gouged out and we can say with the psalmist in Psalm 27:13 "I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Matt 10:28).

However bad things look, God still has many good things to show us. Live in that faith. And we can live in the faith that the floods and the fires won't take us out. He even gives a list of those floods and fires in Romans 8: 35-39. Paul was saying we are indestructible. The New Testament does not use death to mean the cessation of life. It uses the term more often than not to mean separation from God. To be separated from God is in essence what destruction is. But we do not have to fear this because God says that we are God's and we are loved. We shall never be separated.

So if one day you feel like you are 'the willing trying to work with the unwilling to do the impossible for the ungrateful,' you might just on that particular day walking through the fire. But remember you have never been promised you will never have to go through fires, only that the flames will not consume you.

Conclusion

If we are persistent in every good cause

If we refuse to be paralyzed by the uncertainty of the future

If we counter every negative with a positive

We will live in the truth of what God has already spoken over us, we will discover that we are in fact – indestructible. That is the faith that would take us to the future God has in store. And in the day when you feel like you, the willing have to work with the unwilling, might be a day when you are walking through the fire, take heart you have the assurance from God that the flames shall not consume you because you are indestructible. Amen.