

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

January 10, 2010

Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: God's Call and Protection

Isaiah 43: 1-7, Luke 3: 15-22

For those of us older than sixth grade, do you remember being called out or chosen to be a part of a team at recess or gym class in grade school? The teacher, coach or a student leader would line up the class and then have student captains call out fellow students to be on their team. Now it was an honor to have your name called out and you probably felt pretty good about it. Yet, soon you would realize that certain responsibilities would come with being on the team. Playing as a unit with the rest of the team while successfully fulfilling your own position could be quite a challenge at times. I remember being involved in games like dodge ball, crab soccer, Red Rover, softball, touch football or even snowball battles involving all that has just been described.

And so it is for the elders and deacons being ordained and installed today. A fellow member of the church serving on the Congregation's Nominating Committee called you out of the membership line up, and asked you to serve as an officer of this church. I am not aware of who among you was honored and who was afraid when called, but after some prayer time with God, you said, "Yes,"—thank God! We try to spell out the responsibilities expected of you in advance. Yet, those of us with experience know that some of the problems and joys that will come to us as a session and board of deacons will not follow any agenda or job description. As a pastor, I have learned to plan for what I know, but always expect the unexpected. I know that the unknown will appear.

For example, on Tuesday, I received an unexpected call from elder, Gary Moore, that a special meeting of the session was needed right after this service to vote on buying new carpeting for much of the building. The new elders have to be "floored" that such a decision comes before them on the heels of just being installed. Welcome to the team!

The same is true for the rest of the congregation. All of us have been called out by the Teacher, the Coach, the Leader we know as God. He has called us out to serve on his team and bear the responsibilities he has gifted us to fulfill. He will surprise us at times with what he wants us to do. He has chosen us so that we can work together as God's fellowship to further the Kingdom of God, and carry on the vision of "Bringing People Together in Christ's Love."

Thankfully, God does not just call us out and send us forth as his team, his people, his church without helping us fulfill the call. As we heard read in Isaiah 43, the people of Israel who had been through the fires of national destruction and the disaster of exile were reminded that God would always be their creator. He claimed them and knew their names. "You are mine," God exclaimed! I will redeem you from the hell you are in. I will protect you even as you must cross mighty rivers and pass through storms of fire to a place of safety. You are precious to me and I love you, and I love you, and I love you. Do not fear for I am with you!"

As officers of this congregation, and as a congregation, let us recall that as God has called us out, he knows our names; has claimed us in our baptism; has redeemed us; and will protect us for we are precious to him, and he loves us. We will need to remember all this as we work to move forward to promote God's kingdom, and as we may face financial, program and personnel challenges. Let us continually turn to this God and count on what he has promised as we cross new rivers and are tested by fire.

As individual members we may face death, illnesses, job losses, marriage or family problems, yet these same 2700 year-old words of truth are there for us to read and guide us to the God we can absolutely trust. What an awesome God we have!

During the 1960's, actress Patricia Neal put these words of Isaiah into practice. "In the late '60s, she was nominated for an Academy Award for best actress. She had performed beautifully in 'The Subject Was Roses.' Most people who watched her amazing performance knew little of her story. In 1960, she was wheeling her son across Madison Avenue in New York when a cab hit the baby carriage and smashed it into the back of a bus. The baby lived, but there were months of hospitalization and the child had several operations. Two years later, Patricia's oldest daughter, Olivia, got the measles and died quite suddenly one night without warning. Then in February of 1965, Patricia herself almost died. She had three massive brain hemorrhages, five heart attacks, her speech and vision were impaired, and her keen mind was blunted. But she would not be defeated. She fought back in a terrible, agonizing battle. The Academy nominated her for an Oscar, not out of sympathy, but because of her great performance that came after great suffering. A reporter asked her one day about the secret of her survival and recovery. He said she must have had great courage. She shook her head and told him it was not courage. She pointed to a large copper plaque that was nailed to one of the beams overhead in the room they sat in. She said this was her secret. The plaque read: "Fear knocked at the door. Faith answered. No one was there." (Quoted from Roger Lovette's, *A Faith of our Own* [Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1976], pp. 77-78.)

Such was the faith of John the Baptist who relinquished his fears when he answered God's call. God chose John to boldly command all the people in first century Judea to repent of their sins and be cleansed by God in baptism. God also had John condemn the behavior of King Herod and his wife, Herodias. They were involved in a murder and adultery that they had hoped to keep secret. John publically called upon them to repent which made them very angry at him. All this preaching took great faith and the setting aside of fear to do.

As God's chosen church officers and members of the congregation, we must also take John the Baptist's message to heart and be ready to repent of our sins. At the same time we must call upon God to give us the same faith John the Baptist demonstrated to help right the wrongs we may encounter in our world around us. Such repentance and enormous responsibilities can cause us to join the people of Judea in expecting a Messiah to help us and save us as we take on the challenges before us. All the people who heard John the Baptist "were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah." But John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not even

worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” This is the powerful Messiah the people of Israel hoped for and needed. We hope for and need the same Messiah as we serve the God who calls us out, today.

The God who calls us, knows us, claims us, redeems us, and protects us because we are precious to him—fulfilled this love he has for us by sending his Son, his living presence to be this Messiah. We meet him in Luke when he is baptized by John and is praying to his Father in heaven. The Holy Spirit then descends upon this Messiah named Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” This is the Messiah our elders and deacons will say “I do” to when ask the following question: “Do you trust in Jesus Christ your Savior, acknowledge him Lord of all and Head of the Church, and through him believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” This is the same Messiah, we, as a congregation say we believe in when we profess our Christian faith through the Apostles’ Creed: I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into ) hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. “This is the Messiah who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Who causes us to repent of our sins. Who redeems us so we can lead a life of service to God the Father who calls us out to be on his team.

Most of us have already repented of our sins and responded in faith to Jesus, the Messiah. We have stepped forward to serve on God’s team trusting in his protection. For those of us who have held back, as long as we have breath in us, it is never too late as we hear in this story. “Mary Stevens lay dying in the cancer ward of a New York metropolitan hospital, her frail, emaciated body umbilically tied to gray life support machines with bright red digital monitors. Mary had been baptized a Christian as a child into the First United Methodist Church of Oak Grove and married a wealthy insurance magnate, who died in 1960 and left her his fortune. She was an austere, frugal woman, who didn't take too kindly to charities and was known to ‘squeeze the last ounce of blood from a dollar.’ For years her church had tried unsuccessfully to solicit small sums of her mega-fortune for their building programs and various ministries, but she thoroughly refused, never quite seeing the need for such “frivolous things.” Having permanently defected from church for years, and now dying, she wanted Pastor Winnett and his student assistant to come lay hands so that she might die in peace. The minister and his assistant walked into the cold, pale room. Mary looked at him. As he took her hand, she nodded approval, smiled and died. ‘All she wanted was that last touch,’ said the nurse plaintively. ‘She kept talking about a touch from the pastor,’ said the nurse as she handed Reverend Winnett a large brown envelope. ‘She wanted you to read this, Reverend.’ The letter read:

‘Dear Reverend: Don't think me foolish for writing this letter, but I ask forgiveness for my hard and cold heartedness. You see, I thought that since I had money, I didn't need God, but how wrong I was. It wasn't until I got cancer that I realized how blessed I

was. All those years I was too proud to admit that I really needed God and a touch of human love. Please forgive me. If I die before you arrive, please know that I made my peace with God. The Holy Spirit visited me today. He said it was okay to die since I had made my peace with the Lord Jesus. I realized Reverend that it is not enough to be baptized, one must have the Holy Spirit in one's heart. I thank God for this peace and that the Holy Spirit visited me. I am leaving the church the sum of six million dollars for all the programs I didn't support. God bless you and thank you for coming to see me. The Holy Spirit said you'd be here and now I can go and be at peace. Thank you." Like I said, as long as we have breath in us, it is never too late to repent , surrender to the Messiah God who promises to call us out, knows our names, claims us in our baptism, redeems us, sends his Holy Spirit upon us and protects us for we are precious to him and he loves us. "Emphasis," Stewart

To help further imprint in our minds and hearts all we have heard about this Messiah and protective God, let us do the unexpected. Let us turn to our hymnbooks, to our opening hymn, number 361, How "Firm a Foundation," and sing it again with all this background in mind.

1. How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in God's excellent Word! What more can be said than to you God hath said, To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?
2. "Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed, For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid; I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.
3. "When through the deep waters I call thee to go, The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; For I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless, And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.
4. "When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply; The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.
5. "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes; That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake." (First used by John Rippen-1787)