

Keeping Our Eyes on Jesus

Isaiah 42:1-7

4th Wednesday in Lent

April 6, 2011

Pastor Jason Bryan-Wegner

I once took a group of middle school youth to a high adventure camp in northern Wisconsin. At the camp, we mountain biked, hiked, did high and low ropes courses and rock climbed. The kids were most excited about rock climbing.

On the day it was our group's turn, we drove down a dusty dirt road through the forest and came to this 75 foot sheer cliff in the clearing of the trees. We learned the basics of belaying and the inherent trust you had to have in the one holding your rope.

What we discovered was that going up wasn't so hard. Sure, we all knew the person below us was tending to the rope as we climbed the rock face. But we also had the sense that our safety was somehow in our own hands by doing the work of climbing. It was coming down that was more difficult. It meant that we had to creep back to the edge of the drop, turn around, lean all the way back, and then convince ourselves that when we pushed off the rock we were not going to plummet 75 feet to our death. We had to hope that the one holding our rope would lead us through the fear of falling and get us down safely.

This was the only way down. Fear was not an option. Fear would paralyze us from doing what needed to be done.

When Peter took those first few steps out on the water, he trusted that Jesus was holding him up. He knew the face of his Teacher and focused on it more than anything else. Jesus was a buoy in the midst of stormy seas. That is until a couple of things happened. He saw the wind and lost hope.

The problem is that without hope we are sunk. Hope is the fuel that gets us on the water. Hope is what gives people courage to stand at the altar and make promises to another person in marriage without any guarantee of success. Hope is what encourages the same couple to raise children to be grown adults with a future that is better and brighter than the one they had. Hope is what fuels people to leave home and start a career. Hope gives us the ability to face adversity and overcome it. Hope is comfort that God is present when a loved one is diagnosed with a serious illness and we do not know what the outcome will be. Hope gives strength when a job is lost.

Now I want to make something clear. Hope is not optimism. Optimism says, "Everything is going to work out." I think by nature, Americans are largely optimistic. But optimism has a

strong bias toward the positive and can come up short when things don't turn out the way we thought they would. Hope, on the other hand, allows us to tell the truth about our lives. Hope takes a long view and says, "I recognize that God is at work in my life and in the world regardless of how things turn out for me today." Hope gives God power to work on us and in us during times of challenge and adversity. In other words, when the focus of our hope is on God, we have the ability to do things we otherwise couldn't do.

The Israelites learned the power of hope when their whole world was turned upside down. Jerusalem was destroyed. The people were sent into exile in Babylon. Their temple was burned to the ground. Their social, cultural and religious institutions were no longer available to them. It's in this desperate situation where you would think that all hope would be lost, where God's people would simply give up on God.

As it turns out, the exile in Babylon became the greatest period of faith for the Jewish people. In fact most of the Old Testament was written or assembled during this period. In the midst of being uprooted and placed in a foreign land, God brought a new word to the people. God would not give up on them. God would send a servant to the people to faithfully bring forth justice.

The prophet Isaiah brings a word from God that the God who created the heavens and the earth and gives breath to all people has made a covenant that cannot be broken. And God will continue to use God's people to bring about God's vision of justice and freedom for the world. With their eyes focused on God's promises, the people were able to live faithfully in their new land. They were able to walk on water far from home because they kept their minds on these promises, no matter what their daily circumstances.

So how do you keep your focus on Jesus when the wind blows strong and life gets overwhelming? There are two mental laws that Ortberg refers to in his book. The first is the law of cognition. This basically says "You are what you think." Whether we are filled with confidence or fear depends on what kinds of thoughts continuously occupy our minds. The second law is the law of exposure. "You become what you are exposed to." If you spend a lot of time focusing on the negative things and hanging around a lot of negative people, you tend to become more negative in your thinking. We wonder why our culture is obsessed with violence and sexual exploitation. One only has to page through magazines or channel surf for about three minutes to realize what we are constantly exposed to.

The good news is that we have freedom to choose what we think about and to what we are exposed, at least to some extent. Psalm 1 tells of how God's people meditate on Scripture day and night. One way to keep our eyes on Jesus in the storms of life is to memorize verses or short passages of Scripture. The point of memorizing is to write Scripture on our hearts so that it's language and promises from God are as close to us as our own breath.

Daily rituals also can become an important way to keep our eyes on Jesus. I know of some families who leave an empty chair at the dinner table to be reminded that Jesus is present with them in the daily things in life. There are others who instead of thinking out problems or challenges that they face, they talk to Jesus about it. That's what Peter did when he started to sink. When we develop habits in life that keep our eyes on Jesus we build hope that lasts and become the people that God has made us and so deeply wants us to become.

Storms will come. Temptations will rise. Fear will creep in. But remember this...Jesus is more powerful than the wind. Jesus defeats temptation. Jesus has conquered our fears. He holds our rope and when we stay focused on him, we will not fall. Amen.