

Blessing is Like Bulletproof Glass

My first job after seminary was as an assistant chaplain in a retirement community. I mostly worked in the memory wing for residents with Alzheimer's disease. Every Thursday and Saturday, I would walk up and down the halls with my little black Book of Common Prayer, offering conversation, prayer, and scripture reading to whoever was interested. I soon learned the favorite psalms and verses of certain residents, and many of them would ask for me to read the same lines over and over again, often closing their eyes as if to let the words wash over them. There was Psalm 23, of course, and Psalm 100, and Psalm 121. But no words of scripture brought the same response as Isaiah 43:1.

As a young and inexperienced pastor, I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of being charged with saying something holy or profound at life's most critical moments. What do I say in the face of loss, grief, confusion, and, oh my God, death? My chaplain and friend, Robin, had highlighted Isaiah 43:1 and earmarked it, too, as if to say, "This. Read this." (And maybe otherwise just keep your mouth shut.) And I did.

At those moments where a resident felt profoundly lost and disoriented, unaware of who he was or where he was, I read it. When a husband lost his wife of sixty years, I read it. To a daughter who just lost her beloved mother, I read it. I read it in the hospital and the infirmary and by bedsides and in Wednesday chapel, and once, on a bench with a man who believed he was waiting for a train to Paris. I read it, because it was the most important thing they needed to know. I believe it is the most important thing any of us need to know.

But now thus says the Lord,
God who created you,
God who formed you:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

God who created you, Ms. Abney. God who formed you, Mr. Croft. God has called you by name. And you belong to God.

You are mine. You belong.

It is the most important thing we need to know. And that's not because there is something fragile or overly sentimental about our human nature. It is because our human nature is designed to belong, and, specifically, to belong to God.

God is our home. We are at home in God.

I was recently at coffee with my friend Christian talking about God. He is bright and passionate and thoughtful, and if his relationship with God was a Facebook status, it would read, "It's complicated." He's not sure he believes in God at all, while I am quite sure I can't *not* believe in God. We pondered this existential predicament over our coffee mugs.

He wanted to know how I could be so sure. I told him it isn't really about being sure; I have my doubts about plenty of things, just like anyone else. It's actually much more invasive than that. Where is there not God? Where even would that be? I couldn't imagine. From my vantage point, all of life is connected to God. Every last bit of it, down to every last atom. That connection is complex and rich and unfathomable, but I have never once doubted there *is* one.

When I read the story of creation in Genesis, I see a story that tells us the foundation of everything else we need to know. We not only learn that we are created by God, and we are good, which is beautiful news. But also, and more fundamentally, we are in a relationship with God that is both benevolent and unwavering, at least from the direction of God to us. (The other direction gets more complicated, which we'll get to later.) All of creation is in relationship with God the Creator, and for reasons unfathomable to me as much as I imagine they are to you, God has decided to stick with it. The animal skins God provides to clothe Adam and Eve is God sticking with it. The rainbow is God sticking with it. The covenant is God sticking with it. The exodus is God sticking with it. The wilderness is God sticking with it. The promised land is God sticking with it. The prophets are God sticking with it. The judges are God sticking with it. Jesus is God sticking with it. Those disciples are God sticking with it. Pentecost is God sticking with it. Revelation is God sticking with it. This story begins with God-with-us and ends with God-with-us, and everything that happens in

between declares God-with-us, including but not limited to God's own son.

In every conversation I have had with someone about spiritual things, I have never once wondered whether God is with that person. Does God approve of everything that person does? No. I tend to think God should have given humans some kind of disclaimer label: "The views expressed herein do not necessarily express the views of the Creator." But the idea that someone is outside of God? Where would that outside be, exactly? If we go to the depths, God is there; if we rise to the heavens, God is there. Where can we go from God's presence?

God is sticking with it. God is sticking with us.

Not in a neutral way, either. God is not just along for the ride, or ambivalent. God is with us, and that presence is at the heart of every good and perfect thing, every grace, every single breath of life. That's original blessing. It is nothing less than the anchoring conviction that God is with us. Our relationship with God may be, like it is for my friend, complicated. And let's be honest, God's relationship with us is complicated, too. But to my mind, it is never a relationship that is in question.

Before anything else is true about us—before we can talk about what we are good at or what we are bad at, what we loathe and what we favor, before we can talk about gifts or struggles, virtues or vices, before we can even begin to talk about what it might mean for us to be saved—what is true is that we are in a relationship with God, and God started it. And God is sticking with it.

I believe that is true more fervently than I believe anything else.

Here is something else that is true: God sticks with it, and sometimes we do, too. When that happens, when that glorious harmony sings out, we use words like righteousness and faithfulness and epiphany and redemption and the reign/realm/kingdom of God to describe it. Most Christians would agree this is the goal of life, to live in right relationship with God.

Other times, we don't. Sometimes we simply refuse. Sometimes we choose not to stick with it, because we've decided to stick with something else instead. Some people have never stopped to think about what it is they're sticking with at all, so their lives look more like meandering loops than intentional choices. Sometimes we want to stick with it, and even try, but for whatever reason, we can't. Our wills fail us, and we find ourselves doing the very thing we don't want to do. Paul explained this feeling with dramatic fervor when he wrote, *Who will rescue me from this body of death?!* (Romans 7:24).

Every religion in the world lives at the intersection of the presence of the divine and the reality of humanity. What a beautiful, wondrous mess. If you ask me, every interesting thing comes from this intersection. It is THE intersection, the crossroads from which everything else proceeds.

How we talk about that intersection is of vital importance. It determines how we see God, how we see ourselves, how we treat others, what we value, how we react to success and failure, what we believe we're capable of, and whether we are

at peace or not. It determines whether we grow and mature, or whether we give up and give in. It determines what kind of person we become, and what kind of communities we become, and therefore what kind of society we become, and what kind of world we become.

We are a people who live at the intersection of the presence of God and the realities of humanity. What are we going to do about it?

For two thousand years now, Christians have been talking about that. We have debated it, discussed it, written creeds about it, parsed it out in painstaking detail, written millions of pages of theology about it, and started communities of faith to encounter it weekly. It gives us plenty to ponder. What words do we use to describe our relationship with God?

Over the years, sometimes dramatically and other times in subtle ways, we have shifted from telling a story marked by connection to declaring a story marred by distance. And especially in the West, our description of and emphasis on the distance has grown more and more severe.

I believe that is nothing short of a tragedy.

More than any other idea, the doctrine of original sin has slowly eroded our understanding of our relationship with God. Rather than seeing our lives as naturally and deeply connected with God, original sin has convinced us that human nature stands not only at a distance from God but also in some inborn, natural way as contrary to God.

If our relationship with God is the most important one we have, I don't think it wise to discredit it or describe it in negative terms.

I was talking with my friend Carter about this, and he said, “So you mean you want us to see the glass as half full instead of half empty?” My answer is yes . . . and no. If you happen to see the glass as half empty, meaning you focus primarily on the relationship you may or may not have with God, I’ll consider it a huge step forward if you begin to see it as half full instead, where at the very least you acknowledge that God is in relationship with you. I think it would be enormously helpful and healthier for you.

But actually, I want you to see the glass differently altogether. I want you to turn your attention not to the contents but to the glass. Our relationship with God is not *in* the glass. It *IS* the glass. So it’s not a matter of half full or half empty. God’s relationship to us is not in question. And the glass is there regardless of our response to God. The contents, and how we see them, is our response to God. They can be half full, half empty, brimming over, bone dry, three-quarters full. The contents can be cloudy, crystal clear, delicious, poisonous, questionable, or refreshing. Regardless, the glass is there. It hasn’t shattered, or cracked, or begun to leak. It’s bulletproof. It still holds you, like it holds everything else. Even in scripture when God is frustrated and angry with people, it’s a sign that God is committed. Nowhere in scripture does it say, “Such and such happened, and God was indifferent about it.” God is never indifferent about it. Consider it yet another sign that God’s sticking with it.

God’s relationship with you is fully intact. Your relationship with God may differ from day to day, but it is never located anywhere far away or at a distance. You are not

way down here and God is not way up there. You are in God, and God surrounds you. Do not doubt that God holds you, and do not doubt for one minute that God loves you.

I've spent a good deal of time as a pastor talking with people who are on the outs with God. I've been there, too. No relationship of consequence has ever totally avoided conflict, and our relationship with God is no different. Luckily, scripture is filled with stories of people who go through rocky times with God. And what scripture shows is a God who is faithful, even when we're not. So though I don't know what kind of names you might be calling God at the moment, I wholeheartedly believe God calls you by name every moment. Fidelity and steadfast love are God's main character traits. We misunderstand everything if we don't begin there, especially when we're feeling on the outs with God.

We belong to God. That is the center of our identity, the ground of our knowing anything else. If we want to know God, we can only know God through the relationship God has freely initiated with us already. If we want to know ourselves, we start in the same place. Who we are, before anything else, more than anything else, is children of God.

We are people in relationship with a God who is sticking with it. Which is to say, we are all recipients of the gift of original blessing.