

“A Poorly Timed Obituary”  
Isaiah 43:1-7 – January 10, 2016

INTRO: The prophet Isaiah is addressing people whose harsh experiences of life threaten to deaden their hearts. They were overwhelmed with many doubts and because of all the calamities they had experienced, as exiles in Babylon, they were searching for ways to move on through their immediate situation.

Many of you were here yesterday for Helen Scales funeral. At almost 103 years, she had been a part of our congregation for a long time, and certainly was one of our matriarchs. Helen had planned the order for her funeral. She'd done that over three years ago, which meant that the music, the hymns, the scriptures, were all ones she chose. One of Helen's daughters worked on her Mom's obituary in the past few weeks, and then last week both daughters collectively determined what that obituary was going to say.

I've known of some people who write their own obituaries, so that family members don't have to come up with all those details at some later date. And as much as we may think it's an odd practice, it can be very helpful to families at the time a person dies and they have so many things to be thinking about.

And unfortunately, some people's obituaries end up becoming public, while the person is still very much alive and well. A variety of folks have been in this category where premature obituaries hit the news. Macaulay Culkin, the *Home Alone* child star, had a report circulated on the internet over a year ago, stating that the actor had been found dead in his New York City apartment. Culkin debunked the report by posting pictures of himself on Twitter, poking fun at the hoax by writing a caption about "the great things you can do when you're alive"

Queen Elizabeth's death, the Queen Mother, was mistakenly announced in the Australian media in 1993 after a London-based news employee saw an internal rehearsal for her future death (one of many conducted by the UK media over the years). Thinking it was for real, he phoned his mother in Australia with the 'news', who passed it on to the media. It was not true and the Queen Mother didn't die until nine years later.

Bob Hope's death was announced twice. In both cases a pre-written obituary of the entertainer was accidentally published on a news web site: In 1998 his obituary appeared on the Associated Press web site, leading to the announcement of his death in the United States House of Representatives. He lived another five years.

Mark Twain was reported dead twice, once when he was confused with a very sick cousin, and the second time when people lost track of the yacht he was traveling on and assumed he was dead. His famous words "The report of my death was an exaggeration" are still quoted.

Untimely obituaries were even the situation of the people of Israel, who had already written themselves off. As far as they were concerned, they were already dead, and they had that kind of attitude. It's not an uncommon emotion for us. When problems pile up and won't go away, when we're hit with illness, or plagued by financial problems, when we're surrounded by daily stress and anxiety, we may think we are goners. We can't imagine how we'll survive.

“Speaking God's word to the community of Israelites in Babylonian captivity, our text reminds us: ‘When you're in over your head, when you're in rough waters, you will not go down because I am your God, your Savior.’ These people were uprooted from their homes and transported to the Babylonian capital, which was an awful thing for them. For the entire identity of the Jewish people, was rooted in their *theological* understanding of the land. They were proud to be the chosen people Moses had led out of Egypt to claim the land of milk and honey for their own. The land was the principal sign of the Lord's favor. When all this was suddenly snatched away from them, the exiles were overcome with worry, not only for their immediate physical circumstances, but, also, whether they could maintain an identity as the Lord's chosen people without that tangible reality of the Promised Land. They also wondered how they could worship God apart from their cherished Temple. Isaiah assures them. He gives the people a word from God. ‘I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.’” (*Homiletics* 1/16)

These words from God were a reminder to God's people as to who they were and who God is—something we too, need to keep before us. Israel belongs to God. God knows them well and by

name. We belong to God. God knows each of us well and by name. The people of Israel were directed beyond their immediate problems, back to the beginning of their relationship with God. Long ago, they were slaves in Egypt, and God had delivered them—and God could do that again.

For those people and for us, there are things that threaten us and that take the life out of our living. There are problems that chew away at us. There are burdens that cause our souls to waste away. There is the stress that slowly rises like a flood. Broken health, broken families, broken dreams, can cause us to feel like we're done for, like we're in over our heads.

I have a friend who is five years older than I am. He's been retired a couple years, and honestly he doesn't look optimistically at the years ahead. He sees them filled with health issues, physical limitations, the need to downsize his house. And he said he just sees this as a downhill slide. When he said that to me recently, I said, "Now wait a minute. I'm just getting ready to retire, and at this point I'm hoping it's a lot more than a downhill journey. Yes, there are realities of aging, but I hope that's not all there is to life." To which my friend agrees. He sometimes just loses perspective and sees the rough stuff. But on his better days, he's planning a trip to Iceland next fall.

On the day when we remember our baptisms, I have a car-wash story for us. A woman tells about her "first experience using an automatic car wash. Approaching it with the dread of going to the dentist, she pushed the money into the slot, nervously checked and rechecked her windows, eased the car up to the line and waited. Powers beyond her control began moving her car forward. There she was, cocooned inside, when a thunderous rush of water, soap and brushes hit her car from all directions. What if she got stuck in there or water crashes in, she thought irrationally. Suddenly the waters ceased. After a blow-dry, her car was propelled into the outside world again, clean and polished. She now remembers that car wash experience whenever she gets into stormy times in her life—when she feels like she's a victim of forces beyond her control. She remembers that whenever she has to go through deep waters, God has been with her, and she's come out on the other side." (Joanie Yoder)

God's word to us is that if there's a flood, if the rivers rise and rage, God is with us and we don't have to be overwhelmed. In other words, there is life beyond this situation. We are precious and loved—we mean a lot to God, the God who wants us to live fully and to keep living, rather than turn into the walking dead. Every moment that we can choose to live with hope, rather than with fear and despair, is a life-giving moment, it reminds us that our obituary is not in print just yet.

Back in 1888, Alfred Nobel discovered his own name in the paper; an obituary that proclaimed that "The Dynamite King" was dead. The obituary notice was a careless mistake; it was Nobel's brother who had died. But that mistake revealed to Alfred Nobel that the world looked upon him as a merchant of death who became rich by making explosives. He resolved to write a new last will and testament, leaving his entire fortune to establish an award which would reflect his deepest convictions about the real purpose of life's ideals. And that was the inception of the Nobel Prize, created to honor the citizens of this world who have devoted their lives to peace and to reconciliation.

What would we eventually want our obituaries to say about us? She persevered in hard times because of her faith in God. He worked hard AND spent time with his kids. She loved to laugh. When the rivers of life rose, he survived because he knew he was a child of God and God was there with him.

The prophet Isaiah reminds us that as long as we're breathing, it's the time to live and live as fully as we can. And if there are moments when we feel like we are goners, perhaps if we think of God first, rather than as a last resort, we may find enormous resources which help us move through the rough waters. We need to recognize that even though in the midst of our struggles and troubles we may feel "as if God somehow has it in for us. But in fact, it's quite the opposite—God is in it for us." (*Homiletics*)

--Sue Burwell