

Sept 8, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Isaiah 35: 4-7; Psalm 146; James 2: 1-10, 14-17; Mark 7: 24-37

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*'Strengthen the weak. Steady the weary. To those who are anxious, be strong. Fear not. Our God comes, comes to us like the rains falling in the desert, gushing forth with springs of new life, fertile land where there was none. Our God comes. Be open to God.'* [Isaiah 35]

This is the prophet Isaiah speaking, the one who was assaulted, and attacked, and abandoned, and berated, time after time after time in his life, for speaking the truth. It's all he did—spoke the truth to kings, to the powerful, to the wealthy, and to the people, and the response was forever attack, assault, demean, diminish.

And yet, today, Isaiah is all praise. It won't stop. Be open to it, friends. We don't know where this comes from. Was it a vision? Was it relief and release for a few moments? Perhaps he'd just been condemned to death, and this is his swan song: *Praise God! Do not relent in praising the One, all you who are stuck, all you who are in motion, all you who are alive. Praise God! We get to be here.*

*'Yeah, but what about Wednesday?' Arhhhh!*

We can scarcely take it in. One of the worst things about Biblical study is that people think it's a manual on behavior modification. *'And that's why I don't want to read the Bible. Now, I have to do what—like people I don't like?'* When the truth is, this book is just filled with visions, and ecstasies, and moments of profound insight—and the degradation of life is not overlooked. We don't pretend nasty things don't happen, but it's trying to give us those resources for that, renewal on a constant basis.

Brother James, today, speaks to us and that voice which we typically expect from Isaiah. *'There will be no class distinctions among you.'* [James 2:1] It's pretty clear. Go ahead and adulate the rich and the powerful, the hipsters, the

influencers, the people of means, praise them, praise them all you want— and condemn the poor. But remember this, the rich are not the first to receive the Gospel. It is the poor who are rich in faith. [James 2:5] The last shall be first, and faith without compassion is fraudulent. Open yourselves to the vision of God for humanity. [James 2: 8-9] Open yourselves to the poor. Open yourselves to the generosity of God.

Well, doesn't that make Jesus a fraud today when this pagan woman comes to him, pleading for the life of her daughter, and Jesus is cruel. He's exclusive. This is *'I'm not here for you— for the dogs'* (referencing Gentiles). [Mark 7: 27] A part of this story may be that he was focused on his mission to the people of Israel, right? That's part of it. But still—these “outsiders”—that's later down the pike. And she pleads with him and says, *“Yes, that's true. But even dogs get to taste the crumbs of mercy.”* And Jesus' heart is opened to boundary crossing healing, and says, *'Go home content and happy. Your daughter is well now.* [Mark 7:28-29] She moved and opened Jesus. We can do the same.

Then he meets another pagan, deaf and dumb since birth, and heals him. [Mark 7: 32-36] Can you imagine what it was like for that man to first hear sound? Never heard it before in his life—noises, and irritation, music and melody, prayers, the wind in the trees. And don't you think that every word he spoke for the rest of his days, that each word to him was sacred—the precious opportunity to communicate who we are to somebody else, to form words trying desperately to reach each other. We get to do this every day, and it is sacred if we open ourselves to it.

There's a person I want to talk about today, who I would not call deaf and dumb. But he might have called himself that, by his own choice. And the person is Alexei Navalny. You might recall the Russian dissident who died earlier this year—was murdered—spoke out against corruption, pro-democracy, spoke for human rights, arrested on numerous occasions.

I read an article this week that he is a person of faith. How come nobody's told us that, not even in the religious press? This is huge.

Here's a couple highlights. He said, *'Like all Soviets I was baptized as a kid, and then never went to church, and I would have gladly like any ardent atheist*

*yanked on the beard of a priest.'* (That's the big joke in Russia. You know, you can toll the bells, or you can yank the priest's beard. *Who cares? All that lame stuff. Nobody needs it.*)

And then, after an attempt on his life earlier, he underwent a spiritual transformation, and he admitted this new faith brought him a lot of ridicule, but he wasn't ashamed of it. At the close of a trial for forbidden political activities in 2021, he said this from the Defendant's stand in Court, *'Now, I would like to talk to you about God and salvation. The fact is, I am a believer, and that helps me a lot in my activities, because it makes everything much easier. That's what the faith does. It makes everything much easier. There are fewer dilemmas in my life, because there is a Book in which, in general, it is more or less clearly written what action to take in every situation. It's not always easy to follow this Book, but I'm trying.'* And then he quotes 'The Sermon on the Mount'. *'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, justice.'* He says, *'I've taken this as my instruction for my activities.'*

And it was these words of Jesus that impelled him to return to Moscow from the safety of Berlin after he had been poisoned. Do you recall this? Poisoned by the Russian government with nerve agents, they allowed him to leave. He went to Berlin where he recovered for five months. He never fully recovered, and at the end of that five months, he returned to Moscow.

And I remember seeing that, like many of you, watching him walk up to be readmitted, and he was immediately taken to prison. And I said, *"Who is this guy? What is he doing? He couldn't be more public. Why is he about this?"*

Because he's a person of faith—just like Dietrich Bonhoeffer [who] caught the last boat from New York City where he was safely living. (His friends were so happy Bonhoeffer 'will be safe' [in New York].) He caught the last boat back to Germany—last one before WWII began—because he, like Alexei Navalny, said, *'We have to be with our people. Our lives make no sense apart from them. Who are we if we are not shoulder to shoulder with our brothers and sisters.'* And Navalny returned, spent the rest of his life in prison.

He wrote in a letter to a Russian journalist friend in 2021, and he hinted that his death was likely to be untimely and unnatural. Remarkably, he anticipated this with almost dismissive aplomb. He said, *'I have no regrets, and you shouldn't either, and you shouldn't worry. Everything will be okay. And even if it isn't, we have the consolation of having lived honest lives. That is our consolation—honest lives.'* He said, *'I want Russia not only to be free, but to be happy.'*

He was transferred to a prison north of the Arctic Circle, where he was disappeared, even inside the prison, and finally murdered this last January.

*'Open yourselves to the grace of God. Strengthen the weak. Steady the feeble. Say to the anxious, 'Be strong. Fear not. Our God comes.'*  
[Isaiah 35: 3-4]

It is the Russian tradition at funerals to give bouquets of flowers that are in even numbers, because bouquets of flowers with odd numbers of flowers are given to the living. It is widely reported and confirmed, that at his funeral thousands of bouquets were given with odd-numbered flowers.

Alexei. Alive.

Isaiah. Alive.

Jesus. Alive.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.