

NOTE TO READER: This is a transcript of a sermon that was delivered without notes.

Prayer: May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

As I've mentioned before back in the early 1980s I was a chaplain in a prison. You meet all sorts of interesting people in a prison. That's where I met Josh.

Josh.

I got to know Josh really, really well. Not only because Josh was one of the counselors in the suicide prevention program that we ran. But also, because of the relationship he and I had developed there, he would come and speak with me. He'd been there about 2 years by the time I showed up. Three years by the time he and I started speaking regularly. And by three and a half years he could no longer control what was going on in his family outside those walls. His marriage was falling apart. He hadn't seen his daughter the entire time he was in jail. His wife had been visiting him once a week, and then maybe every two or three weeks, and then once a month, and then, and then she just stopped.

And he just watched it fall apart. Pleading with her. Pleading with me to tell God to fix it. We couldn't fix it. He talked about his life just falling apart. "It's falling apart, man, and there's nothing I can do."

He used to write me, too. Not only would I see him on a weekly basis when I was over in the jail for my regular hours and my worship services. But he would write me. He always called me "sir." He wouldn't call me George. I said, "Call me George" and he would say, "yes, sir. Aph! sorry sir." But sir. I don't if there was military in the background or what, but he wrote me this letter one day. Which I've kept all these years. Just trying to process the grief and that his life is falling apart.

"I pray and I pray because I believe that all things are possible for the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob." [He could write, by the way. This man could write!] "I believe he saved my life on more than one occasion for a good reason. However, I've experienced and endured so much pain since then. I read his word now, but I don't get any comfort from his promises like I did when I first met Him. Doubts and fears often cloud my mind and I can break down crying at any moment. I feel like I've tried everything, read everything, said everything in prayer with hopes of gaining some relief or a breakthrough or a positive change in my marriage, all to no avail.

Sir, I don't know what else to do. I don't want to give up believing because if that happens all hope will be lost. But I feel real close to giving up. Most recently I've doubted his love and care for me. In my darkest moments I've even questioned his existence, the reality of his word and the truth of his promises. My love and faith in him needs to be unconditional. But this whole situation with my wife has caused me grief and pain. I know that it's not right for me to base my faith in God on how the circumstances of my life turn out. But I'm just being honest with you, sir. I'm struggling but I want to be better. I want to overcome all the negativity I witness every day. I want the joy of the Lord in my life and to have peace that passes all understanding. I want to believe that my marriage will be saved and that God will

show me mercy not because of anything I've done but because of who he is. But I feel so lonely. And abandoned."

It was just falling apart. And there was nothing he could do as the pieces of his life just lay in shambles around him.

This is story one.

Story two is of a woman named Edie. I met Edie at that same time of my life in the early 1980s when doing ministry in Salem. At a gathering of people at her house one day, quite off-hand she said to me, "Oh yeah, my Dad. He fell out in the street and got his head run squished by a truck." She laughed. She said, "Serves him right."

Later during that gathering I said, "why did it serve him right?" And she got this very quizzical look on her face and she said, "I... I don't know...!"

So it was a number of weeks later when she called me and she said, "Could ya stop by the coffee shop" She owned a coffee shop. "Could ya stop by the shop around two when things slow down?"

So I stopped by. We went for a walk. She said, "I keep thinking about your question. 'Bout why, why it served him right. And I'm startin to get these memories ... something I've pushed down so bad... I'm just startin to get these memories..."

Lot a walks. Lot of meetings later. All during her childhood: the worst that a Dad can do to his little girl was going on. Repeated sexual abuse. And the more the memories came up, I wished I'd never asked the question. The more the memories came up, the more her life started to fall apart. The marriage started to tank. She was yelling at her kids all the time. Two kids, one of whom was born with severe mental and physical handicaps and her minister had told her that it was her fault for all her sin in her life. So she had these memories. And she said, "George it's just fallin' apart and I can't keep it together and I don't know what to do."

It's a strange thing when things fall apart. When the prophet Isaiah wrote to the people of Israel he said, "Behold, I am doing this new thing, do you not perceive it?!" This was a strange thing for him to say at that time. Their life, their collective life and their individual lives had been shattered. For nearly double the time that our own nation has been in existence Israel and Judah were sovereign nations; they had existed. And then, and then the conquerors came in and shattered their land. Tore down Jerusalem. Tore down the Temple so that all that you have left even to this day is one wall, the wailing wall of Jerusalem. And these folks watched their family members, their friends, their children, slaughtered in front of them and those who were left were carried off into exile. And they were slaves, slaves for their captors. That's where we get Psalm 137: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept as we remembered Jerusalem." And in the midst of that shattering Isaiah speaks: "Behold, I am about to do a new thing. Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?"

It was because scripture lesson this morning was from Isaiah 43 that I remembered Josh and I remembered Edie. Because it was Isaiah 43 that we prayed with often in those different situations. Isaiah 43 begins with "Now thus saith the Lord, the one who created you, O Jacob, who formed you, O Israel. Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You

are mine. And when you walk through the waters I will be with you, and through the rivers they shall not overwhelm you. And when you walk through fire, you will not be burned and the flame will not scorch you. For I am the Lord, your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior. And you, you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.”

With both Josh and Edie, we began with those passages. That passage right there from the beginning of Isaiah 43. Just knowing they were loved, just hearing God say, “you are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you.” What a difference it made.

The funniest things happen sometimes. When our lives shatter. Because one thing we learn, one thing we truly learn, is you cannot rebuild the old life from those pieces. You can’t do it. The pieces are too fine, you can’t possibly put that back together in its same shape.

Josh said to me one day, “You know, it’s really weird, sir. It’s really weird because I’ve had those episodes of crying that I have told you about. . So I started prayin. Started prayin this Isaiah passage that ya gave me and all those penitential psalms, like 6 and 51 and 130. ‘Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord.’ Well here’s the strange thing that’s goin on, sir. I’m becomin’ the ‘go-to guy’.” That’s how he called it. “I’m becoming the ‘go-to guy’ in my pod. Other guys are coming to me now, man. And they’re, they’re telling me about how bad they feel and about what they’ve done and how they’re families are fallin’ apart because the families on the outside can’t take it. I’m questioning God’s existence and they’re, they’re here talkin’ to me about him, man. What is goin on?!”

I said, “You’re a minister, Josh. You’re a minister.” He said, “ But I don’t have any answers for ‘em! I doubt the existence myself!” I said, “Join the club! What do you think it’s like being clergy? We don’t have any answers either. But we walk with them. As God is walking with you. No answers. Lot a love. Lot a listening.”

He became a much better suicide counselor. He continued to become the “go to guy.” The guards used to send people from other pods in to see Josh, because, frankly, he was probably far more effective than I ever was. Because when you’re on the inside, you know that world a lot better.

He started rebuilding a different kind of life. Rebuilding. No, not rebuilding. Building. From those pieces of a shattered life, something was changing.

Same sort of thing that happened with Edie. Once all this really started comin’ up, we were able to find a VERY, very good counselor. Very experienced. Who was able to bring her together with her husband and then her children and then even her older sister, who also had repressed all those memories. Edie’s life, it changed. I’m not gonna say it was “better.” She was the same person, yet fundamentally different. She built something new and the marriage changed, her relationship with her children changed, he distance and cool relationship with her sister changed. She listened differently. She loved differently. She was, and I suspect still is, different. Shattered. Built. Just like with the prophet, speaking the words when the people of Israel’s world had been shattered: “Behold, I’m doing a new thing.”

I’m always surprised by God moments. I’m always surprised by what is offered at just the right time. I had written a completely different service for today. Completely different sermon. Threw it off when I read a poem and all the rest of this started coming to me. The poem is by a woman

by the name of Hannah Whitehall Smith, who herself had been through some real hell. There's no other word for it, just hell. And when her life was rebuilt, when it was constantly being built again, from the pieces, she wrote:

“For Thou art making me; I thank thee, sire.
What thou hast done and doest thou knowest well.
And I will help thee. Gently in thy fire I will lie burning,
on thy potters wheel I will whirl patient, though my brain should reel.
Thy grace shall be enough, my grief to quell.
And growing strength perfect through weakness dire.”

Behold, from the shattered pieces I am about to do a new thing and now it springs forth.
Do you not perceive it?

Amen.