



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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“Through and Through and Through”

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Matt Duvall at Myers Park Baptist Church

On January 12, 2025, from Isaiah 43:1-7

My name is Matt and as of today, I've been a friend of Bill W.'s for 1 week shy of 4 years—next Sunday will be 4. Now that may be an odd sentence to start a sermon with—it may be the first time it has happened here at Myers Park; I don't know—but a variation of that phrase is how some of my friends and I all begin our stories in the most essential gathering I've ever been a part of.

Sometimes when I go to a meeting, I go because I am in a difficult place—I'm feeling anxious, I've experienced something that was painful or maybe triggering, or I'm coming up on an anniversary of something that happened, and the body remembers. Sometimes I go because it's an important day for someone—they are there for the first time, or they are there hopefully for the last, first time. Maybe they are sharing their story in that meeting or it's a big anniversary—a year. 5 years. 20 years. Sometimes I go with someone who is trying to figure out if this community is something that they need in their life, or they are trying to find their way through their own internal battle with their struggles and their pain and their loss and they need to be in a community of people who might know something about that. Sometimes I go hoping or needing to hear something of substance that will be helpful for me in my own journey—that nearly always happens if I pay close enough attention and I get out of my own way. But sometimes I just show up without any expectation—I'm in a decent place, it's just another Tuesday, I know it is important to be a part of the community.

In some ways the things that get us to the door of the recovery community can be a lot like the things that get us to the door of the church. Some of us come to places like this for some of the same reasons that people show up at basements or houses all over every community—because own lives have been filled with immense pain, or the world around us has become unbearable and we don't know what to do about it. Sometimes we come with our grief and our loss, and we hope that we won't be the only one who remembers. Some of us are here for the first time or we are here every time the doors are open, and we qualify for the program. Some of us come alongside companions who are wrestling with something—trying to find their way—and we don't want them to be alone. Sometimes we ourselves are fumbling around in the dark looking for some kind of answer, some kind of next step, some sliver of light to show us the way. And sometimes we are on a kind of autopilot. We walk in the door and we go through the motions of our routine in this place because it's another Sunday and it's what we do.

And in both of these places, we tell our stories. Whether stories from The Book or stories from our lives and our life together, we tell ourselves stories because we believe those stories not only have an impact on how we carry the weight of what we have experienced and how we process the events of our life, but they even help shape the future we might try to imagine for ourselves. It's not just the stories we tell ourselves, but also the stories that others tell us, whether we wanted them to or not.



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Those stories come to us, they come at us—we internalize them through our conversations, through our media consumption, and they slowly begin to give shape to who we are and who we are becoming. Sometimes the stories are ones that we overhear, like being surrounded by loud talkers at a coffee shop. We stumble across them. We pick them up accidentally. They fall into our lap or get passed along in front of us. And whether we tell these stories to ourselves, or others tell them to us, or we just overhear them, they impact us in some way, don't they?

You all know stories are important because you still tell some of the stories of what has happened here at Myers Park through the generations. Stories about bringing together the resources to do church in a new and deeply impactful way. The establishment of a free pulpit, an open baptistry, and the ordination of women. Challenging white supremacy and championing ecumenism. Organizing to support integration and racial and social justice. Addressing full inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the church and working towards an even wider welcome for humanity. Giving generously to meet the needs of the community and wider world in creative and subversive and sacrificial ways. Working towards environmental justice and human rights and a broader and deeper embrace of God's radical shalom for the world. What are the stories that impacted you in and through this place... the ones that sparked your holy imagination, or that gave you the sense that faith, practiced in community, could be an active and robust and thoughtful and justice-oriented enterprise that could transform a city and indeed a world for the better? As Barbara Brown Taylor asks—“what was the net that caught you” that you, in turn, keep throwing back out into the world?

I imagine there have been so many stories of good and important and faith filled work through the generations of Myers Park that have transformed each of you, and this community, and the larger body of faith that you all have even forgotten some of it—you couldn't remember it or write it all down and capture it—it wasn't possible. We celebrate those stories that are a part of this congregation's history today.

In her book “Addiction and Pastoral Care,” the late Sonia Waters, an episcopal priest and professor at Princeton Theological Seminary says this about one of the differences between the recovery community and the kind of community that most Christians create together. She says: “Christian's bond as saints. We don't share the true ugliness of our lives, our personal and moral failures, with other Christians. We seek to be good, to be appropriate, to be worthy of love. But people who have experienced addiction, whether they are in rehab, AA/NA meetings, or out on the streets, bond through telling each other the stories of their suffering, their struggles, and their grief.” She says, “I have been changed by their stories.” I have too... both in the hearing of others... and the telling of my own.

There are also some other stories that we are telling or are at least overhearing, aren't there? Stories about the decline of the church in America and the dwindling of the numbers of this place from years or maybe months ago.



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Stories and speculation written in journals and publications about what did or didn't or might have happened. Stories of ministers who have had to leave through the years for many different reasons. Stories of failed ministries, or of conflict or of some people leaving who didn't get their way or others who did. In other words, the stories of what comes along with trying to be a faith community together in the public eye. What are the stories that you are overhearing, or that you are passing along?

Have you ever thought about what telling those stories might give shape to?

Now don't mishear me. I'm not advocating that we shouldn't tell the truth about what is happening in our lives and in our life together—in fact it's quite the opposite. In order to be at our healthiest and best... in order to be transformed, we need to practice rigorous honesty with ourselves and with each other. The great sin in our culture isn't having problems, it's people knowing about our problems. I think one of the greatest issues that we face in our own lives and that can make our life together so fraught is our denial about how things really are. We cannot transform what we are unwilling to confront and much of our numbing and our channel changing and our spending and our silencing is all in service to our need to avoid reality. To stay in denial.

Our scripture for today moves us to face reality, which is something a lot of us might rather avoid. In fact, much of our theological framing which permeates the moral model of how we so often handle addiction (which mirrors the approach that we take with so many other parts of our lives) places a deep emphasis on the willful control of our life and ourselves to the extent that we think we can avoid the difficulties that others might have to face. If we just get the words right... if we mean it fully in our hearts... if we know it completely.

We could skip across the rocks instead of wading through the waters.

We could walk across on dry land instead of getting our feet wet.

We might extinguish the flames and walk between the embers.

Remember that the people of God have been through the wilderness, they have been through the exile. They have walked through the waters. They have seen fire consume. And here in Second Isaiah, the prophet encourages the community to understand that what has happened to them in the past will also happen to them again in the coming future—can you imagine how defeating that must have been?

The prophet says not “If” but “When” you experience the waters that rise up around you and cut you off—they block your view for where your next step should be; they slow your movements; they chill you to the bone... keep going and pass through.



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Not “if” but “When” you feel the waters rushing against you like a mighty river... when you have to fight to keep your footing...when you feel like you are moving more downstream than upstream...when you are exhausted and feel like you are about to be pulled under by the current... keep going and pass through.

And” When” you come to the fire that you fear might just burn you up... You think it is going to consume you and engulf you and leave you and your life an indistinguishable pile of ash... keep walking through.

Through the waters and through the rivers and through the fire. You will not be overwhelmed. You will not lose yourself. You will not be lost and forgotten. Because you are not alone. You are not alone. We are not alone. We are kept... we are companioned by... we are transformed through... God’s redeeming love. The Hessed of God. God’s creative care for each of us and God’s transforming acts for all of this world are rooted in God’s redeeming love.

What I have grown to embrace about this passage is what my own recovery work has revealed to me—that we need not be afraid to face the difficult realities of our lives and of this world—for God’s redeeming love meets us at the place of vulnerable surrender and those are the places that hold the greatest promise for transformation. Mutual, vulnerable, authentic community is essential for finding our way through, and one of the ways we do that is by telling our stories to each other again and again—both the good stories and the really hard stories. “Let everything happen to you, beauty and terror” the poet Rilke says... “just keep going.”

Here at the beginning of a new year. Here at the beginning of a leadership change, both in this congregation and in our country. Here in the midst of a long season in this world with so much conflict and discord and pain and loss and trauma and war and destruction. It is important to not only remember the specifics of what you have done, but the circumstances that precipitated the courageous action that you took in generations past. For generations you have looked at the world and have said, “it has to be better... we need to be better... what can we do? What if everything thus far has been pre-amble. What have you learned about the things that are necessary in order to transform this world? Courage. Hope. Persistence. Willingness to risk. Generosity. Creativity. Love? Your work is not done. In fact, in this new year, it is just beginning. Thanks be to God. Amen and amen