

Preached by Youth
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
March 21, 2010
Youth Sunday

Psalm 137
Isaiah 43:14–21
John 12:1–8
Philippians 3:4b–14

Emily Quinlan

Hi. My name is Emily Quinlan and, I am a Christian.

In Isaiah 43:14–16 it states: “This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians, in the ships in which they took pride. I am the Lord, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King.”

This is what the Lord says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland. The wild animals honor me, the jackals and the owls, because I provide the water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to drink to my people, my chosen, the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.”

When I first read this passage, these words that Isaiah had written, the words that will forever be permanently passed to other generations, I didn't know where to begin. So, I figured that I would start here. This passage talks about the Redeemer, Goel, and the word Redeemer means so much more than any other name that you could give the Lord. Redeemer is when you have a deeper connection with God.

When the Hebrews were sentenced to exile, they were taken away from their holy temple. They felt abandoned, forgotten, lost in a world full of darkness. Their faith was fading due to not being able to pray to God within the temple.

I believe in Jesus Christ. I believe in the Lord. I believe in Heaven and Hell. I believe in the Holy Spirit. The Lord is my Redeemer. My faith has been cast away, forgotten and left behind, and it has also been held on to for dear life. I have a very personal connection with God; he is my heart, my soul, and comes first in life. When it comes to talking about my love for God, it can sometimes be difficult for me. Expressing to others my devotion to the Lord is a very deep and overwhelming step in a relationship.

Since it is hard for me to express my love for God through words, I like to use music. By singing the hymns that have been passed down for decades, I feel that I am telling God how I feel. When I am able to sing within the church walls, I feel God surrounding me, giving me hope.

Connor Glenn

The past four years of my life have gone by so fast. During those four years, I have been an active member of clubs and teams. In the fall, the culmination of my high school life came to my mind when I was creating a résumé suitable to send to colleges. I realized that as the years went on, the clubs and teams changed. However the one constant on the list was being a part of the Bush Hill Youth Group. Although I couldn't always be there, I realized the importance of keeping a relationship with God. Friends come and go; God is always there. Although at the time I didn't always appreciate the importance of such things as youth group and small groups, I have come to realize that they are a great way to maintain a relationship with God. I will admit there were some nights where Mrs. Trickey's desserts were my motivation to go to small groups. However, I always left feeling fulfilled ... and that's not just from the pies and ice cream. I also remembered my freshman year attending confirmation class. It was difficult waking up that early on Sunday mornings; however, I finally understood that my going to class was a way to broaden my faith and bring me closer to God. Becoming a part of the church is something I will always cherish.

I only really get nervous before two things in life; playing basketball and public speaking; however, in order to fight my nerves, I remind myself that God will always be there for me. Before games I always prayed. My prayers focused on my ability to give all I could on the court and to thank God for the fact that I was physically able to play. It reminded me that through the many ups and downs that come with a basketball season, God is always there. Through the losses, or the nights when I played below my expectations, I knew that I could count on my family and God to have my back. God doesn't jump on the bandwagon, so to speak. He is there through the thick and the thin until the very end. There were nights I would wonder why the shots wouldn't fall or why my team didn't play to its fullest potential. However, the next game I continued to pray and do all I could, and we rarely had two bad games in a row.

"Do not remember the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing." This statement comes from the book of Isaiah, Chapter 43, verses 18–19. On my journey into a new life in college, I am reminded to step out of my comfort zone and not dwell on my past. Mistakes are inevitable. However, the biggest mistake one can make is to fear making the mistake in the first place.

Afterward, you cannot dwell on what has happened. A mistake should be learned from, not replayed in your mind. After all, things in the past are just that—in the past. This is very promising, especially when moving into a new independent life. It reminds me that when I am in a new town, most likely without any people I know, I will be led on a path of doing new things and meeting new people. Tangible things come and go, but experiences in a life filled with God's love will stay with me forever. He watches my back so that I can look forward to the many new experiences I hope to have in college.

This is a vital theme in Philippians, Chapter 3, verses 4–11, which says in part, "But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless. Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."

A loss in a relationship with God is looked at as the consequence of personal gain. So I will try and remember that gains come and go. And that my relationship with Christ and God needs to be strong and will last forever. In loss we look to God for guidance; however, in gain we should give God thanks and also seek His help and instruction. After all, our relationship with God trumps everything.

So as I begin my journey to a new life at whatever college I end up, I know that I am not alone. God has my back.

Emma Hedley

I'm extremely indecisive. I hate having to make decisions, and I usually spend far too long overthinking and overanalyzing any decision that I have to make. Thus, I found the decision of which colleges to apply to super stressful. This is the next four years of my life, so I must select schools where I will love the time spent there. There are over 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, let alone in other countries, and I was supposed to choose a handful of these to submit applications to. As you can probably see, I was already doing a lot of thinking, and I wasn't even very far into the process. Over time, with the help of my dad, I created a list of places to visit; and then from that list, I narrowed it down to 11 schools which I wanted to apply to. Eleven is considered to be a lot of schools to be applying to; however, this number seemed to be quite an accomplishment for indecisive me.

The next question that came up was whether I wanted to apply early decision anywhere. Applying early decision means submitting an application to just one college in November, hearing back from them around Christmas time; and if admitted, a student who applies under this plan signs a binding legal agreement that they will attend that institution. Obviously, by the very nature of the program, it is a very serious decision to make and one that cannot be changed. There was always one college where I considered applying early decision, Claremont McKenna College. One of the biggest influencing factors for me was that when I visited the college, I got an indescribable but great feeling, and knew that I would love it there. However, there was a long time between my visit and application time and I spent a lot of time thinking about what I was going to do. This college had great programs, but compared to many of the other colleges that I had seen, did not have the same caliber of facilities. It is also very far away from home. So I thought and rationalized for many months, during which I realized that I didn't have the nerve to apply early, for fear that it might be the wrong decision; and that, perhaps, things such as the facilities that my brain told me were not good enough really could be problematic. However, I'll come back to this story in a minute.

The passage from John tells the story of Mary, who spent the equivalent of an entire year's salary on oil to anoint Jesus' feet with. Judas criticizes her actions, saying that he believes the money should go to the poor, but Jesus defends Mary's actions. When we discussed this passage on the ski trip in small groups, the question was posed as to whether we agreed with Judas, and the first reaction of nearly everyone was yes. I know that it makes more sense in my mind because it is a more logical conclusion. I immediately picture the faces that we see in so many different places—on TV, in magazines, in textbooks, and in so many other places—of

those struggling in poverty. I see the malnourished children with their protruding stomachs, the millions of injured people in makeshift hospitals in Haiti, and images of civilian victims of war. How could it not make sense to help these people; isn't that what Jesus is all about—helping the poor and the needy?

Upon further contemplation of the passage, however, it became clear to me that Mary was acting with her heart. She didn't try to find logic in her decision or rationalize it, she just reacted passionately, with her heart, in a show of her faith. Keeping this in mind, Jesus' reaction finally didn't confuse me. This wasn't Jesus turning his back on the poor, instead it was him finding beauty and strength within Mary's faith. How could Jesus not support a woman who took her abundance of faith and used it to thank God and praise Him and His son. I believe that Jesus knows that the poor will be helped by others in the future, and such an outpouring of love and faith is not so common. I believe that this is what prompts Jesus to support Mary in telling Judas that the poor will always be on Earth to help, but Jesus won't always be on Earth to be praised.

The idea of going out and blowing all of the money that we earned through hours of labor and hard work into some whimsical desire of the heart blows my mind. Thus, in order for us to be able to act as Mary did, following our faith and our hearts, we must first surrender our control. I see control as coming through calculated actions, where outcomes are predicted and the desires of the heart are kept in check by the logic in our brains. In order to act with passion and love as Mary did and Jesus wants us to, we have to surrender our hearts and souls to the will of God. We have to be open to follow what we believe and feel through our faith without doubting it or trying to control it. We must give up the control that we have and go spend a year's worth of salary to praise God with oil. The whimsical desires of the heart are the desires and beliefs that are not filtered or contemplated upon but, instead, show parts of the soul. The logical thoughts that we have seem to blur our true desires and put them into the realm of earthly desires. However, what is inside the heart has not had time to be changed, and ultimately this is everlasting. On the contrary, earthly desires often end up changing. I believe that Jesus' support of Mary indicates that we should be placing value on our abundances of faith which will go with us beyond our lives on earth. Value is not found in money but instead in the faith of the soul. The value of Mary's actions did not come from the monetary worth of the oil but instead from the fact that she followed her heart, she just thought about her faith and her love of Christ.

Going back to the story about my college decision, I realize that I let my head win. I thought too much and let the logic that formed in my brain over the months after my visit trump the feeling that I had in my heart about the college. In retrospect, now that I am sitting and waiting to hear from the myriad of colleges that I applied to, I am only truly nervous to hear back from one place, Claremont McKenna. I now realize that I should not have let the logic in my head win over what my heart was telling me through the gut feeling that I got on my visit. I cannot say that I regret my decision, as I feel that regret is too harsh a word; but I know that if I could go back and change my decision, I would—I would have made my decision with my heart, not my head.

Surrendering my control and following my heart scares me more than anything. I like the control—I like to see where I am going. I want to have good idea of potential outcomes in order

to brace myself for whatever ends up occurring. At first, I reacted in agreement to Judas because it seemed to me to be the logical conclusion. Beyond that, Judas's suggestion is one that leaves the giver in power, as they can think about how much they will give. In contrast, Mary was able to surrender her earthly possessions by using the oil. Once all of my money is gone from that year, then what will I do? However, such logic of my mind does not take into account the role of God in my life. If I live my life for God, in reaction to my faith in Him, then He will provide for me what I need. In Isaiah, God promises that He will "make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." God knows that His people have been enslaved for a while and that they have lost faith in Him. He reminds them of all the things He has done in the past and promises to sustain them in the future. He promises all this "so that they might declare [His] praise." God's promise to provide for us and sustain us allows us to surrender our control and act as Mary did, when she surrendered her earthly possessions and acted upon her abundance of faith.

Emma Rudebusch

During the time that Isaiah 43 was written, the Jews had been in exile from Jerusalem. The Jewish people were worried that their history and tradition would be lost, and they would never be allowed to return to Jerusalem. In their new land, they had begun to stray from Jewish law and its traditions. In order to combat this, the Jewish leaders led a resurgence in Jewish tradition and an attempt to revive their original religion. It was also during this time that the Torah really took shape. As a whole, the Jewish people had begun to lose faith in God. They were angry, frustrated, and without much hope. God had promised them they were the chosen people that He would always look after them, but now it appeared He had broken this promise. But Isaiah pleads with the people not to give up just yet. He reminds them that God has always been with their people. He brings up the time He parted the red sea in order to allow Moses and the Israelites to escape slavery in Egypt. He tells them He promised to save them before and He kept that promise. But after reminding them, He tells them to forget the past because God is about to do something great. He tells them He will forgive them for having neglected worshipping Him for so many years. Although they have not kept up the tradition of animal sacrifices, He would prefer that they trust Him and serve Him by doing right. He also tells him that He will forget all of their sins.

In the first verse of Isaiah 43, God is described as a "redeemer." We are familiar with that term being used to describe Jesus, but this is the first time God refers to Himself as a redeemer. To be redeemed is to be saved, just as God is promising to save the Jewish people from exile. The word that was used in Hebrew is "goel." "Goel" translates into English as redeemer but the word had another meaning to the Hebrews. At that time, a goel was a member of the family, usually the oldest male relative. Under Jewish law it was the job of the goel to help out the rest of the family in times of need. If someone was sold into slavery, it was the job of the goel to buy him back. If a goel's brother died, it was his duty to marry his widow if there are no male sons to carry on the family name.

The most famous goel in the bible is Boaz, from the story of Ruth and Naomi. After Ruth's husband dies, she insists on staying with her mother-in-law, Naomi. After they return from

Moab to Bethlehem, Ruth works in a field which belongs to Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi. Boaz ends up marrying Ruth in order to ensure that she has a son.

The word goel evoked an image of God that the Jewish people were not used to. Instead of God being a far-off being who spoke to them through prophets on occasion, he became family. It was a word that could give them hope during their exile. They had been feeling abandoned and hopeless, but thinking of God as their goel could remind them that God is always with them and will protect them.

We live in a world that makes it difficult to have faith in God. Especially as an adolescent, when most of my generation doesn't have any sort of relationship with God. My peers are in some ways similar to the Israelites in that they have cut themselves off from God. Just like the Israelites, they have begun to fall away from traditions and customs of past generations. Being surrounded by this culture can make it harder for me to keep my faith. It's easier to succumb to my doubts when others around me don't have faith at all. But even during these times of disbelief, God will still be there for me. No matter how far away I might stray from Him, He will still be there. He will provide for me when I am in need.

In a few months I will be heading off to college. I'm not sure where I'm going yet, but I do know that it will be a big change. I will be away from my family and friends and the routines I have at home. Although it is my choice that I am leaving, I am still nervous for the time to come. Just as the Jews were in exile from their homes, I will be away from everything I know. It will be hard to continue the same traditions and habits I have now. But I know that God will get me through it. He will always be there to redeem me from my lowest points. No matter what happens, He will forgive my sins.

Everyone knows what it's like to feel abandoned by God. But even when we're at our lowest points, God is still there. He has been there for us since the beginning of time and will continue to be our redeemer. God will always provide us with what we need. Even when we break His rules or forget His message, He will forgive us. He redeemed us when He gave up His only son, Jesus Christ, so our sins could be forgiven. By doing so, He made sure that we would always be saved. Even during our darkest moments, God will be there to help us.

Amen.