

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 15, 2012**

REFORMATION AND REVIVAL

Isaiah 43:1-7

Tomorrow, as I'm sure you know, is the official Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, honoring the life and legacy of the heroic leader of the civil rights movement. Today is actually Dr. King's birthday. He was born on January 15, 1929, which means that if he were still alive, he would be 83 years old today. We honor Dr. King for his uncompromising commitment to nonviolence in the face of race discrimination, hostility and even hate. This commitment to nonviolence was an expression of his resolve to live out the teachings of Jesus. And we remember his dream, articulated so eloquently in his speech at the March on Washington in 1963, a dream of the day when not only our children but every person, young or old, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, will be judged on the content of their character not the color of their skin. Nearly fifty years later, his dream lives on and continues to inspire Americans of all races.

Too often, though, in our celebration of Dr. King and his monumental role in the civil rights struggle in America, the centrality of his Christian faith is underappreciated or simply neglected. Like all of us, King had flaws. I don't mean to give the impression that he was without sin. None of us is. I simply want to call attention to the fact that his faith in Jesus Christ and his commitment to live as a follower of Christ undergirded his labors in pursuit of justice, freedom, equality, and peace.

For example, during the civil rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, Dr. King required participants in the campaign to sign a commitment card pledging to follow the ten commandments of the nonviolent movement, the first of which was to "meditate daily on the teachings and life of Jesus." Among the others were these:

- Walk and talk in the manner of love, for God is love.
- Pray daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
- Refrain from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.

It is obvious that all of these were motivated by a sincere commitment to live a life that was honoring to God.

As we remember Dr. King this weekend and reflect on his life and legacy, let's be sure to give thanks to God for the instruction, direction and inspiration Martin Luther King, Jr. received from the Word of God, for the genuineness of his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, for the anointing of the Holy Spirit in his life, and for the difference his life has made in this world for good.

Now, let's look together at God's Word in the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah. Turn to Isaiah 43:1-7, which is a touching message of grace and love and blessing from God

to Israel, His wayward covenant people. Let's give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word.

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It is not always this way, but I often have a fairly clear sense of what God wants me to preach (or preach on) from one Sunday to the next. Not so this past week. Early in the week, with the congregational meeting scheduled for today weighing prominently on my mind and heart – and yours, too, no doubt – I just wasn't sure what message the Lord wanted me to share with you. I asked the Lord for guidance and discernment. I looked at some specific Bible passages I might preach on. But I lacked a sense of confirmation from the Holy Spirit – until I just “happened” to pull out from my library a commentary on Isaiah by Ray Ortlund, Jr. and, while thinking about some of the attributes of God, I just “happened” to open the commentary to the section on Isaiah 42-44 and began to read. Almost immediately, I thought to myself: “Wow! This is it!” Which is another way of saying that I don't think either of those occurrences just “happened!” I think God was saying: “Neil, this is what I want you to share with the people of Faith this Sunday.”

So, here we are, all of a sudden, forty-some chapters into the longest prophetic book in the Bible. For a little bit of context, Isaiah's ministry as a prophet spanned the reigns of four kings of Judah (Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah), beginning around 740 BC and continuing until his death around 681 BC. During this time, the northern kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 BC, ending its mostly inglorious history as a nation. The southern kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, would continue to exist until it was overrun by Nebuchadnezzar and the army of Babylon in 586 BC, marking the end of God's covenant people as an independent nation.

Isaiah was alive when God's judgment fell on the kingdom of Israel. The sword of God's judgment did not fall on Jerusalem and Judah, however, until a century after Isaiah's death. But God, in His providence and sovereign wisdom, enabled Isaiah to see into the future – to see not only the coming judgment, but also the mercy and grace God would show to His people, to the objects of His saving love. Which is what we see in this passage we read from Isaiah 43.

The theme of this section of Isaiah (chapters 42-44), according to Ray Ortlund, is “God's Way to Reformation and Revival.” I don't know about you, but I want to know God's way to both reformation and revival. I don't normally preach somebody else's sermons, but I want to say right up front that most of the rest of this message comes either directly or indirectly from Ortlund's explanation of these chapters. The Lord used him to speak to me, and I pray the Lord will speak to you through his insights, too. (In case you're wondering about his credentials, Ortlund is a Ph.D. biblical scholar who taught for several years at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He is the senior pastor of a church in Nashville and serves as president of Renewal Ministries, a ministry started by his father, Ray Ortlund, Sr. He is also on the council of the Gospel Coalition.)

Ortlund says that beginning in Isaiah 42:18 and continuing through Isaiah 44, the prophet shows us the one true God who *reforms* people who have lost sight of their purpose, and who *revives* people who have lost their spiritual vitality. Reformation and revival. Here is the distinction he makes between them: “Reformation,” he says, “is the recovery of God’s *purpose* for us. Revival is the recovery of God’s *life* in us.” Both are essential for us as God’s people, because what good is purpose without life? And what is life without purpose? We need both reformation and revival, both a God-given purpose and a God-powered life. The people of Israel needed both reformation and revival in their life. So do we. We need reformation and revival in our own lives, in the life of our church, and in the church throughout the world.

I love what Ortlund says next: “God loves to renew confused and tired people.” Do you know why I love that? It is because I often feel tired and weary – sometimes physically, sometimes mentally or emotionally or spiritually, sometimes all of the above. And sometimes I feel confused, too, about why things are the way they are, about why God allows some of the things He allows, and about what God wants me to do. Do you ever feel that way? If God loves to renew confused and tired people – and I believe He does – then it means there is hope for me. Hope for you, too. Hope for all of us.

Reformation, of course, is an important word for us Presbyterians, and for all believers and churches who trace their heritage to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Knox are among our greatest heroes in the faith. We look to Calvin as the father of the Reformed tradition, with its emphasis on the five *solas* of the Christian faith: salvation by *grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Christ alone*; *Scripture alone* as the supreme, final and only infallible rule for faith and life; and *solī deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory. Calvin, in Geneva, mentored John Knox in the Reformed faith. Then Knox took the Reformation back to Scotland, and what emerged, says Ortlund, was a worldwide Presbyterian movement. Here is how he describes what God was up to at that time in history: God “hailed the ship that we call the church into dry dock, scraped away 1,500 years’ worth of encrusted human traditions that were slowing it down, refitted the ship with fresh gospel understandings, and relaunched a seaworthy vessel that is still going strong.” If that sounds overly optimistic, given the state of much of the church in the world today, Ortlund adds that “reformation must never stop. Our constant tendency is toward rudderless inconsequentiality, and God is constantly getting us back on course to our true destiny.”

The reformers of the 16th century understood the need for ongoing examination and reformation in the church. They adopted the Latin motto *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda (secundum verbum dei)*, which means, “The church reformed, always reforming (according to the Word of God).” Reformation in our lives or in the life of the church must not be subject to the whims of the day or the winds of a culture that refuses to give God the glory He deserves. The kind of reformation that pleases God always consists of change that brings us in line with the Word and will of God – from which in our not-yet-fully-sanctified-and-glorified state we stray easily and often, intentionally and unintentionally.

As did the people of Israel, who failed time and again to fulfill the purpose for which God chose them. They were to be a blessing to the world, but they wanted to keep the blessing to

themselves. They were meant to be a light to the nations, but they preferred the darkness of indulging their own desires. It has happened many times throughout history, not just to Israel but in the church as well, where men and women who profess to be followers of the Lord Jesus Christ have turned away from God's Word and substituted their own moral and spiritual judgment for God's. Whenever this happens, and wherever it happens, a new reformation is critically needed.

What is reformation? It is "God renewing in our hearts a passionate clarity about His purpose for us. It is God reawakening in us a love for His truth and His standards. It is God preparing us for the display of His glorious salvation as we reshape every aspect of our lives and (every aspect of) our churches to that end" (Ortlund).

Do you have a clear and passionate understanding of God's purpose for your life? For the church?

Do you need to have your love for God, His Word and will reawakened? He is wide awake and passionate in His love for you.

Did you know that God wants to display the glory of His salvation in you and in us together?

That is why the Lord said to Israel, to His people throughout history, and now says to us:

Don't be afraid, I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name. You're mine.
When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you
When you're in rough waters, you will not go down.
When you're between a rock and a hard place,
it won't be a dead end.
For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I paid a huge price for you:
all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in!
That's how much you mean to me!
That's how much I love you!
(Isaiah 43:1-4, adapted from *The Message*)

Truly God paid a huge price for you and me. More than just Egypt or Cush or Canaan. He paid for our salvation with the blood of His own Son, who willingly gave His life for us on the cross, the Righteous and Holy One taking the place of guilty sinners, so that with our lips and lives we might declare His glory and proclaim His praise. Isn't this really God's purpose for our lives? And for His church?

And in His love, He has graciously promised to be with us as we encounter all the storms of life, all the rough waters, all the tight places, and all the hard decisions that are part of life in this world.

How can we not be moved – and changed – by the measure of His grace to us? How can we not be reformed, renewed, and revived by the grace and power of His Spirit at work in us?

I must stop for now, but God willing, we will return to this next week. May God have His way in us. Yes, Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your Name. Amen.