“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.” Isaiah 40: 6-8

Good Afternoon and welcome to the Augustana Chapel of Reconciliation—a place where everyone is welcome.

Today is January 18. A few short weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ, arguably the most momentous holiday in Christianity, one for which we prepare for weeks and look forward to for months. In this region, it is a celebration does not easily go unnoticed. But just days after the holiday, we are back at school, back at work, traveling new countries, and working new internships—starting anew. Because shortly after the Christmas holiday, we celebrate the New Year—a chance to start again: resolve to read more, write more, communicate better, and so on.

I think it rather appropriate, then, that at this turning point—at the bottom of this new leaf—we discuss Isaiah 43.

Despite being located in the middle of Isaiah, chapter 43 really comes toward the beginning of deuterocanonical Isaiah, or Isaiah II, a book that could easily stand on its own as its tone and message is very different from the preceding chapters. Some have called this section the book of comfort.

The passage for today fits that description well. The Lord says, the prophet writes “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;” Like much of Isaiah, this passage takes advantage of powerful imagery to convey a very strong and forward message. You might notice the word “If” doesn’t appear anywhere in this passage. It doesn’t say if you pass through rivers, or if you walk through fire, but when.

When we are in the thick of hell and high water, God promises to be with us, to protect us.

But, why? The prophet Isaiah answers: the Lord says, “Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you”—the four most important words in the entire passage: because I love you. Again, the word “If” is absent here. It doesn’t say I will be with you if you steer clear of sin 30% of the time, or I will be with you if you follow the commandments 6 days a week. There are no qualifiers. The message is clear: “I will be with you ... because I love you.”

Now, that message is perhaps the traditional take-home for this passage. Something to remember when we are in the thick of those trying times in life—of hardship, confusion and frustration—when a loved one passes, when we’re in between jobs, rejected from graduate programs of choice, or on the losing of a battle with whatever inner demons seem to follow us day in and day out—days when we look in the mirror and ask God, “Why? How? Where were you—where are you?” Most of us have been in those situations and if you haven’t you will be one day, and if you have you probably will be
again. And so we are reminded by this passage to remember that phrase: “I will be with you … because I love you.”

That’s an important message. But in the 22 years that I have been alive, I’ve been on cut grass for most of it. After all, “trying times” get their name for being something different than the norm; something infrequent and more difficult, perhaps.

If I had a chalkboard up here I would draw a line straight down the middle and on the left hand side write “Scenario 1”—that which I just described to you: times when you’re in the thick of it, at the end of your rope, at the bottom of the pit with no answers; only questions and doubt. On the right hand side I would write “Scenario 2.” This is the norm—perhaps the situation in which we find ourselves most often, when things are O.K. and we aren’t questioning (as much) God’s presence in our lives or his promise of protection.

In fact, I would put my self in that category right now. Sure, the stars aren’t perfectly aligned for me, but all in all I’ve been reminded of God’s work in my life a lot lately and I’m feeling fairly confident in the work of the Holy Spirit. So, maybe I’ll just stow this passage in the drawer for later when I need it because today, I’m fine.

When I got to thinking about this passage, I got a little worried that that would be the response: that this passage would only be applicable to a few and the rest of us would leave with advice for a rainier day. That would be really unfortunate, because the message here is really powerful—this announcement of steadfast, unquestioning, nondiscriminatory love.

So I decided there has to be a way for everyone to apply this scripture to their lives, no matter where they lie on the spectrum at this particular moment. We talked about how it applies to those on the left side—in the thick of hardship—but what about those on cut grass; on dry ground?

Remember the passage didn’t say if but when you pass through river and fire. Maybe today I’m on dry ground, but who around me isn’t? The Word tells us at some point everyone will pass through river or fire. Simple probability then tells me someone around me is in the thick of it—perhaps in the deepest, darkest part. Maybe someone I know and love, maybe someone I haven’t met yet, or maybe someone I really dislike. In any case, the response is the same.

I included two verses from Isaiah 42 at the beginning of the scripture because I really liked the questions the Prophet Isaiah asks Israel. The prophet writes, “Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Who is blind but my servant, and deaf like the messenger I send? Who is blind like the one committed to me, blind like the servant of the Lord? You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.”

These two verses make me imagine a happy-go-lucky cartoon character—Mickey Mouse, maybe—running errands for God as his servant and messenger. Mickey skips down the highway gaily, whistling all the while, you can see the music notes popping up above his
head. The sun is shining; the birds are singing, because Mickey is on the right side of the chalkboard. Things are going well. He’s on top of the world.

Sometimes I think when things are going well for me, I become overly optimistic. I make positive assumptions about the people around me instead of opening my eyes to see what is really there.

As Mickey skips past rows and rows of houses on his way to deliver messages and supplies for God, he misses the woman or man sitting on their stoop, head in their hands, asking God, “Why? How?” He fails to recognize people around him on the left side of the chalkboard.

Whether you are in Scenario 1—and need to be reminded yourself that you are protected because God loves you—or Scenario 2—and need to be reminded to open your eyes and see who you can assure of God’s protection or better yet assist through the river or fire by serving as God’s hands, eyes, ears and mouth. Someone you know (or someone you might meet) needs a hand, an ear—a hug perhaps—or some kind words, to remind them of the protection God promised and the community He provided. God gives us that love without any qualifiers and created in his sight we are expected to do the same.

So this passage is important for you. Yes you, the person to whom I am speaking. You and the person next to you, and the person next to them; their neighbor, his brother, their uncle, your co-worker, your boss, your students, your professor, your pastor, your children and your grandparents. Every single person lies somewhere on the spectrum between the left and right sides of the chalkboard. This passage isn’t only for those in the thick of it.

“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field … The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.”

If you haven’t picked a resolution for this year might I suggest that if—not if, but when—you recognize a community member in the depths of a river or the belly of a fire you extend the same unbiased love God shows us—a helping hand, a thoughtful prayer, or at least point them in the direction of Isaiah 43—to let them know that God’s promise of protection stands forever.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, may you open our eyes and ears, and guide our hands and mouths so we may help our neighbors, family members, friends—new and old—enjoy your promise of protection and steadfast love. Amen.