

“When You Pass Through the Waters...”
Isaiah 43:1-7

January 9, 2022 Sermon by Rev. Alex Creager

Isaiah 43:1-7

¹But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.

²“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.

³For I am the LORD your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.

⁴“Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.

⁵“Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;

⁶“I will say to the north, "Give them up,"
and to the south, "Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth —
⁷everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Some years ago, I got to witness a baptism that looked far different than any I'd seen before. It was at Church of the Pilgrims, just off Dupont Circle in Washington, DC. The church had just redone their sanctuary to give more space in the center, so that they could do some creative things with movement and space. And this Sunday showed why.

The baptismal font wasn't at the front of the church. It was in the dead center. And when the parents brought their 6-month old daughter forward to be baptized they came in the very middle of everyone. At the start of the liturgy, it was just them and the two pastors next to the baptismal font. The pastors shared what baptism was, and the promises God makes in this sacrament. The parents answered questions, along with the congregation.

And then came the blessing over the water. The pastors started with praying over the waters for God's Holy Spirit, love, and promises to be at work. But then they did something very unique. They invited all those gathered in worship to come and stand around the family and baptismal font. And then they asked if anyone else would like to offer a blessing and promise over this water.

I thought surely nobody would. We Presbyterians are the frozen chosen of course. We don't typically do things like that. But right away, to my great surprise, a number of members stepped forward. Each one dipped their hands in the water, brought it out high up above and offered their own blessing and promises. It was beautiful.

I remember one of these blessings most of all. It came from a member who was also a close friend of the family. And right away, you could see how much she loved this child in front of us. As she dipped her hands in the water, she looked directly at this young girl and said:

*“Dear child, we promise to be there in all the times to come.
The joyful times. Your first steps. Your first day of school. The first time you fall in love.
The times of decision. When you start to consider faith for yourself. When you see gifts and start following a call. When you go off to school or work, and have to trust that you have gifts to share with the world.
And even in the very difficult times. The first time you fail at something. The first time your heart gets broken. The times you get sick, and the times you experience loss, the times you feel all alone.
We will be there, surrounding you with our love, our presence, and our care.”*

It was that last section that surprised me and stuck with me. When I think about baptism, I like to focus on all the positive that is to come. The good times of joy, of faith, of using gifts and talents, of celebration and community. I like to think of all those people waving and smiling as each child goes past.

But we know that that's not all that life throws our way. We know that for every one of us, and for every child we baptize, that there will be difficult days ahead too. Days of struggle. Days of sickness. Days of loss and grief. Days of getting your heart broken. Days where you don't know where to turn to for strength or direction.

The power of baptism is that it's promises from God, its claim to us that we are truly part of Christ's body, God's family, that we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and that we are precious, beloved, and valued at all cost, that those promises are not just for the happy, easy times. They are all the moments we face in life, good and bad, joyful and sorrowful, celebrating or grieving, sick or healthy, confident or unsure, supported or broken-hearted, God's promises do not change. God says to us through these waters of baptism – whatever life throws your way (and life throws a lot), I will be there.

Today in our reading from Isaiah 43 we hear these words from God:

*² “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.”*

As followers of Jesus we are not promised that everything is going to be easy or safe or fine. No, God says that we will pass through waters and walk through fire. Waters can be fun and joyful and even sacred. This past summer, our second during Covid, the highlight for our family each day was jumping into our community pool after work each evening, see our two-year-old daughter Alanna in a floaty splash and giggle and sing. That is one of the moments of water.

But I also heard this week people share how water is not always so friendly. When I asked Steve Henley, our music director what he thinks of water, he shared how he finds the ocean to be daunting and threatening. It has huge waves and currents that can pull you out. It's not safe.

I also heard from BAPC member Amy Compton. She shared that a moment that actually felt like baptism for her was kayaking down the New River in college. Trying to go back upstream to do a trick on a rapid, she got trapped underwater, and all she realized in that moment was how much she desired life and breath. Everything else, including her pride, didn't seem to matter so much, as simply knowing that gift of life and breath from God. It was a holy moment for her, but not one that was cute or safe and easy.

God promises to be with us in all our moments of life, loving us, claiming us, reminding us who we truly are. You are precious in my sight” God says. We know that is true for the children we baptize. But do we also know that for ourselves, and for our neighbors?

In the Presbyterian Church, we don't baptize anyone a second time. And the reason for that is not that we are prudes or think that there's a shortage of baptism water somewhere. No, it is because we believe that the promises of baptism never go away. No matter where our life path takes us. No matter how windy or straight or road has been, we don't ever stop becoming children of God and members of Christ's family.

One thing for us as the church to consider this week is where are we in the waters? As our members, our neighbors, the people living in our community go through their own waters, are we standing on the shoreline idly by, saying "You're on your own." Or are we willing to join with God, jump into those waters, and share whatever you are going through, you are not alone. Whether it's a step of faith or a difficult decision, whether it's a new birth or a loss of a beloved family members, whether it's success at work, or wonder where someone's next meal is going to come from, how can we join in those waters, and say, "You are a precious child of God. And we won't let you face this time alone?"