

The Waters of Life

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I've always had a rather terrified fascination with water. Oh, not the stuff that comes out of the faucet in my sink, but big water. Even as a girl growing up across the street from the Indian Ocean, I would experience a weird queasy feeling when swimming out beyond my depth – sensing the immense volume and mystery surging below my tiny self. And I remember well that rag doll feeling of helplessness when caught unexpectedly by the surf.

When I was twelve years old, I discovered that even rain can hold a deadly force, as it poured down nonstop one gloomy morning. Eighteen inches of water fell in 24 hours and turned all the roads in the city into a raging river that swept away everything in its path, cars and people and animals, even as it rushed through our front door to fill up our living room with mud and water. Yes, I learned at a young age to have an deep respect for water, which has the power to sweep us away, to push us under, to overwhelm us... to teach us again and again that we are fragile and vulnerable and ever so tiny in the vast ocean of life.

But my fascination with water springs from the truth that along with its force and terrifying might comes the power to buoy us up and carry us along, to soothe us, to cleanse us and to nourish us. This same water which has the power to destroy us also has the power to give us life.

Let us pray:

Refresh us with your Word, O God. Baptize us with its power and send your Spirit to renew us that we may know ourselves claimed and named by you to be your beloved children. Amen.

These past few weeks have felt a bit like a flood tide for me. Christmas is always a busy time in the life of the church, not only because of the many events of worship and preaching, but also this year because in the life of this congregation we have encountered too much news of death and illness and family struggles and unemployment. So when I read these verses from the prophet Isaiah that are set for this Sunday's lectionary, they seemed to be written directly for us today, as much as for the Jews who first heard them 2500 years ago.

The world superpower at that time was Babylon, which had marched into Jerusalem, crushed it, and left it in ruins. Many Jews were taken back to Babylon as war prisoners where they sat in exile. They had been lifted by the flood waters and swept away, separated from all that was familiar, from their homes and their lands and their customs and their temple. They were out of their depth, caught in the immense current of world events they could not control. And just when it seemed that things could not get any worse, they did. A new power—Persia—arose in the East and was threatening Babylon. Once again, the Jews were sitting right in the middle of the warpath. Babylon was sure to be destroyed. What would become of the unarmed, completely dispensable little colony of Jews? The raging rivers of history were about to roll over them again. As Tom Long put it: "They were caught between a dead past and a future not yet born." And they were afraid.

We read this history today because this is our story too. Oh, perhaps you may never have been to Babylon, or been a prisoner of war, but who of you have not experienced some time when you have felt out of your depth, swept away by a force you could not control, facing a future that seems haphazard and unpredictable? In the untimely death of a young father, the unanticipated blow of a sudden illness, the long-dreaded but unavoidable loss of your job, or your youth, or your life-savings? Or perhaps you feel caught up in the flood of world events that surge around all of us? These things keep us mindful that we are a tiny and fragile people, caught up in the sweep of a tide that is so often

are.' She looked at me and said, 'Yes, yes, yes, I know.'" Suddenly all sorts of energy flooded her. She seemed to be relieved from her depression because suddenly she realized again that she was blessed. She went back to her place and immediately the other residents said, 'I want that kind of blessing, too.' And we want that kind of blessing too.

Every time we celebrate a baptism on this chancel, we ask all of you to remember your own baptisms. And although many of us cannot literally remember what happened to us when we were barely months old, what we are asking you to remember is that God has reached out to name you and claim you and is acting even now to fulfill his baptism upon your life.

O, we know that our faith will not protect us from the stormy waters of life. God never promised us freedom from loss or failure or heartache. As human beings we will cross rivers of pain, we will encounter floods that have the potential to sweep us away. But when the waters rise and threaten to overwhelm us, if we remember our baptism, we will know that Emmanuel, God with Us, stands beside us in that water. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you." God holds you close and says, "I know this one. This one belongs to me. Do not be afraid."

Those words are the gospel in a nutshell. They are the words spoken by the angels to the shepherds outside Bethlehem: Do not be afraid. They are the first words spoken to the women at the empty tomb on Easter morning: Do not be afraid. And they are the words spoken by the risen Christ to the disciples in the upper room: Do not be afraid, for I am with you, even to the end of the age.

And if we remember our baptism and live into its truth, we will know that we have been given our identity, commissioned as Jesus was, to live as God's beloved children, blessed in order to carry his blessing and his assurance and his presence to those who may feel overwhelmed by the riptides in their lives. If we remember our baptism we will know that even now, with the centuries behind us and an unborn future before us, God is working through our hands and our hearts, through our songs and our tears, to tell the world: "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you....Do not be afraid." Amen.

1 The Rev. Dr. Thomas G. Long, Baptism of the Lord, Day 1. January 11, 2004.

2 Henri Nouwen, The Life of the Beloved, Day 1. May 17. 1991.

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