

January 13th, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7

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“Waters of Grace and Fire of Love”

Life has an ability to overwhelm us. We just entered into a new year, and right before that, a lot of hopefully looked back on the year that left us. 2018 was very hard for my family, particularly for my mom. She stopped working in order to care for my grandmother because she was in declining health. Then my grandmother died. With that, came constant care for my grandmother's property and garden. In the midst of this, there was some problems in my brother's family. Then my mom got ill. When I was wishing her a happy new year I wished that 2019 be a good and happy year for her, because 2018 was so hard and overwhelming. Life has an ability to overwhelm us, leave us empty, discouraged, and hopeless. The Prophet Isaiah's words that Sandy read for us this morning were written to speak to that kind of experience.

Many scholars who study Isaiah say that part of this large book of this great prophet was composed to address the anguish of Israelites following the Babylonian exile. From history and from the reading of the Bible, we know that the Kingdom of Judah and the Kingdom of Israel were destroyed by a Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar in five hundreds BC. Jerusalem was under siege and the First Temple was burned down. Many Jews were scattered. But the king, the elite and others were taken into exile to the Babylonian territories. The loss of family members that might have died during the siege, change and adaptation to a new country with its customs, language and culture, and the loss of the temple, all this had an incredible impact on the Israelites. With the loss of the temple and crushing of the kingdom came their loss of faith and doubting that God was even with them anymore.

Even though, we are removed from them by thousands of years and thousands of layers of culture, some of us can relate to the experience of loss, sudden change, or experience of being cut off from family and friends. It can happen anywhere anytime. It can happen to communities. Like a shutdown of the government that left many federal workers going without pay. Or a snow storm, Gia, that left hundreds of people stranded on the interstate and several dead. Or opioid crisis with the highest numbers of overdoses recently. Hardship can come on a personal level, in the face of loss, of a loved one or a job, divorce, long-term illness. And then there is a week or even one day that can overwhelm us so much that it feels like we are over the head and can barely see above water.

But we know from scriptures that God does not leave God's children in despair and hopelessness. God always has a way of encouraging God's children and bringing consolation to them through God's word. And these verses from Isaiah 43 have an ability to do just that. The words are so brilliantly crafted to bring hope and

remind the Israelites/Hebrew that God is near that I don't need to preach on them or somehow interpret them. They can stand on their own. They are so powerful! We can read them one more time and go home. Haha

We won't do it. I invite you to look together just at the couple of verses at the beginning of the chapter. First of all, Isaiah says that it is the Lord God who is saying these words, the Old Testament favorite, "Now thus says the Lord." And then it goes, "he who created you, o Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel." God reminded them of the creation event. Remember, the setting of creation in Genesis 1: it was chaos and waters swept over the face of the earth. God created out of chaos and God continues to create even in the midst of whatever chaos life brings to us. The next two verses are about waters and fire. I want to tell you that sometimes using images that were very familiar to the people can be therapeutic and help people heal their psychological pain or go through trauma. The scribe who wrote these verses was a great psychologist and knew how that these images would be very powerful for the Israelites. So Verse 2, I think, is the one that a lot of us are familiar with.

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you"

This verse is unique in a sense that it talks about the future, but has an image of the past in it. A lot of scholars think that here Isaiah had crossing of the Red Sea in mind during their Exodus from Egypt. It would remind the Israelites that God was with them then. God helped them through this. And God will not leave them alone now. The image of fire in the next verse reminded them of the furnace of Egypt, being slaves there and making bricks for Pharaoh and that God rescued them from it, too. The Israelites needed a reminder that they have been here before. And moreover, that God had been there before with them. In these verses God reminded the Israelites that God created them as human beings and as a people. God was with them and redeemed them before. And God would do it again. So, it is remembrance of how God was present with us before that encourages us to move forward in hard times and circumstances.

My mom always asks me what text I am preaching on and she always reads it. She read these verses of the prophet Isaiah yesterday and she told me she cried. She told me that she was reminded of how many times she knew God was with her and how several years ago God let her pass through a very hard time of addiction and suffering in our family. How that was the time of going through waters and fire for her and how through these experiences, she experienced God's love and grace. She told me that she knew that God was with her in 2018 as well and God let her pass through it and how God brought our whole family together through the time of hardship and trial. My friends, the way Isaiah begins these verses with evoking memories in the Israelites of who they are and who God is is so encouraging and comforting that encourages us to remember who we are and remember who God is. I understand that we are not Israelites and that we do not have that deep of a

connection with Exodus, and parting of the Red Sea. But as Christians, we have a very deep connection with water. waters of baptism. In fact, today it is Lord's Baptism Sunday when we remember how Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan river and how Jesus was called the beloved of God. When we get baptized, water reminds us of God's creative power over the chaos, and how God has created us and called us good and beloved. Fire reminds us of the Holy Spirit who is always with us, reminding us of God's amazing love for us in Christ Jesus, who is our comforter in the times of trials and pain.

The waves of life can crush us and leave us alone in the middle of the ocean or worse, trap us in a riptide leaving us with no strength to move forward. The fire of trials can burn us out leaving us empty and bitter with no strive to try again. But God does not leave us or forsake us. God is helping us pass those through. It is the waters of grace and the fire of God's love that sustain us when we are over the head and can't see above water and are burnt out. All these images come from the Bible, this incredible book that God uses to encourage us in our faith, bring hope and comfort, and challenge us in our faith. And thinking of some practical ways of deepening our faith this year, I am inviting all of us to recommit to reading the Bible. Join a bible study or read it as a devotional or read the whole bible in a year. So, this is an invitation for us today.

I want to finish this time of preaching with a poem of a woman who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the 20th. She was a believer and a poet and her poems encouraged many people during her life and after her death. Her name is Annie Johnson Flint. Annie lived a hard life. In her early twenties she was diagnosed with arthritis and in couple of years it was so severe that she became wheelchair bound. Her poems was the only means of her income. She experienced a lot of hardships in life but she never doubted God's love and presence for her and always wanted to bring hope and encouragement to others. So let's receive the blessing of Annie's words written on this morning's verses of the Prophet Isaiah:

"Not Down, But Through"

"When Thou passest through the waters,"
Deep the waves may be and cold,
But Jehovah is our refuge,
And his promise is our hold;
For the Lord himself has said it,
He, the faithful God and true;
"When you come to the waters
You will not go down, but through."

Seas of sorrow, Seas of trial,
Bitter anguish, fiercest pain,
Rolling surges of temptation
Sweeping over heart and brain...
They will never overflow us
For we know His work is true;
All His waves and all His billows
He will lead us safely through.

Threatening breakers of destruction,
Doubt's insidious undertow,
Will not sink us, will not drag us
Out to ocean depths of woe;
For His promise will sustain us,
Praise the Lord, whose word is true!
We will not go down, or under,
For He says, "You will pass through."

Amen.