

Just Passing Through  
Isaiah 43:1-7  
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So, how's your 2022 going so far? I've heard of "baptism by fire" but I think this new year experienced baptism by snow. With a start like this, I'm expecting the murder hornets to make their return around March. And yet, even with the challenges we've already faced this year, we trust that God is walking with us into it, even if God is wearing snow boots and a parka.

Speaking of baptism, that's our focus today, the baptism of Jesus which kicks off his ministry. All four gospels tell some version of Jesus' baptism (actually, the gospel of John only alludes to it): Jesus goes to John the Baptist, who baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River. As Jesus is coming up out of the water, he sees the Holy Spirit descending like a dove and hears the voice of God claim him: "You are my son, my beloved."

Down through the centuries and for believers today, baptism holds a special significance. It is the primary way we outwardly demonstrate our inward commitment to God. We Disciples of Christ have two ways of doing this, what we call sacraments: baptism and communion. When a person is baptized, they are, like Jesus, passing through the waters as a way of publicly committing their lives to God and receiving God's blessing and God's claiming of them. Weekly communion is a reminder of our commitment and God's blessing.

But there's more to baptism than just that, and to fully understand it we have to go back before Jesus, to see what the Hebrew scriptures tell us. If we're looking for passages explicitly about baptism, we're not going to find them. This was not a ritual that the Israelites practiced. But like so much of Christianity, the rite of baptism has deep, deep roots in Jewish history.

One primary connection is the Jewish ritual of purification. While the laws that God gave to Moses aren't the most compelling reading, they do highlight a crucial characteristic for people who want to follow God: the need to be clean. There are extensive laws about purification and cleansing rituals that people would go through as part of a worship service in order to be declared clean, both physically and spiritually. That's why one of the ways people understand baptism is that it is washing us clean of our sins.

Today's passage from Isaiah gives us another way to connect the history of the Israelites with our sacrament of baptism. First, some context. The book of Isaiah is believed to actually be at least three different books that were compiled together. Biblical scholars reference them as First Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Third Isaiah. First Isaiah, which is chapters 1-39, is a book focused on judgment, as the prophet admonishes God's people for their sins and for turning away from God and warns them to repent or suffer the consequences of disobedience. That warning comes true as the Israelites are conquered by Babylon, who ransack Jerusalem and take the captured Israelites back to Babylon during a time that's known as the exile.

Second Isaiah, which starts in Ch. 40, is written during the exile, after God's people had been forcibly removed from their land, their temple, everything that provided meaning and stability for them. While the first 39 chapters of Isaiah pronounced judgment, Is. 40 starts with, "Comfort, o comfort my people, says your God. Speaking tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Second Isaiah is a word of hope for the exiled Israelites as they look forward to returning home after 60 years in a foreign land.

Ok, that's the history and background, which brings us to today's passage in Isaiah 43. Word has come down that Babylon has been conquered by Persia, and the Persian king Cyrus is going to allow the Israelites to go home. You think the Israelites would be thrilled about this, but not exactly. Going home didn't mean simply hopping the next camel to Jerusalem. It would mean an arduous 900-mile journey around the fertile crescent of Mesopotamia, crossing raging rivers and scorching deserts, places where it was very easy for your GPS to lose its signal.

But the psychological dangers were even more perilous than the physical ones. The Israelites had been living for 60 years in a foreign nation and felt utterly forgotten by God. They believed God obviously didn't care about them anymore, conveniently forgetting the warnings they had received in First Isaiah. And now they were returning to a homeland that had been ravaged, a temple that had been destroyed, and they didn't even know if God cared anymore.

Have you ever felt forgotten? During seventh grade my family moved from Southern Indiana to Washington, D.C., which meant I moved away from all the friends I had known growing up. When I returned six years later, I ran into a lot of those friends. But more than once when I recognized and greeted them, they looked at me like I was about to invite them to join my pyramid scheme. There was no sense of recognition there. Have you ever looked at someone who you thought knew you and realized they had no idea who you were? Like the Israelites, I felt forgotten.

That's where Isaiah 43 comes in. As the Israelites anxiously prepare for the treacherous return trip home, they hear these words: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, and you are mine." I saw this powerful quote the other day that said, "Sometimes you think you want to disappear when all you really want to do is be found." That's what the Israelites experience when God says, "You are mine." They have been found. God is reminding the Israelites that they belong to God.

And it's a good thing, because the Israelites are about to hit the road, and they're not sure what obstacles await them. But God says, "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." No matter what lies ahead of them, raging rivers or scorching deserts, they can know that as they walk their journey, God walks with them.

These lines would have carried great significance for the Israelites, who would have been very familiar with God's use of the elements of fire and water. Moses sees God in a burning bush, which leads him to Egypt. He leads the Israelites out of the fiery furnace of slavery in Egypt by passing through the waters of the Red Sea. God leads them through the wilderness, appearing as a pillar of fire, and eventually the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the promised land. God can work through elements like fire and water to protect God's people.

So, what does this have to do with baptism? When we are baptized, we pass through the waters and are reminded that God is with us. No matter what awaits us in life, be it a raging river, a lonely desert, a pathless wilderness, God is with us. And we need to know that, because our baptisms don't signify the end to all our troubles. Far from it! What happened to Jesus right after he was baptized? He spent 40 days in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Our baptisms don't rescue us from the hardships of life, but they do serve as a constant reminder of who walks with us, and in who's image we have been created.

In the Disney movie, "The Lion King," the lion Simba, after living in exile with Timon and Pumba, eating grubworms and singing "Hakuna Matatta," is called to return to his homeland and rescue it from his evil uncle Scar. Simba resists, thinking he's responsible for his father's death. The baboon Rafiki tells Simba that his father is alive, and can take Simba to him. The

baboon leads Simba to a pool of water, and tells him to look in. Simba glances in quickly expecting to see his father, but instead sees only himself. "Look closer," says Rafiki. "Your father is in you." As Simba looks again, the image of his father comes to the surface of the water. "See?" says Rafiki. "You have forgotten who you are, you are more than you have become. Remember who you are..."

God says, "I have called you by name. You are mine." God tells us that at our baptism and each day afterwards. When we are navigating the rough waters of life, when we feel like life is going up in flames, God is there with us. God transforms those rough waters into times of cleansing. God changes those flames into a refining fire, burning away our impurities. In our toughest trials, in our darkest times, God is there with us, working to bring about good within us. As each day has troubled waters and fire for us, so each day we can wear our baptism. Each time we encounter water – bathing, crossing a bridge, getting a drink at a fountain, shoveling the frozen version from our driveways – we can be reminded that by these waters we have been claimed.

There's an artist named Dafri who has a stall at the new Greyline Station on the north side of town. Dafri uses mixed media collages to create his art, which usually has a spiritual theme to it. My all-time favorite work of his shows an African-American man making his way through a cotton field, with a giant hand holding a lantern, lighting his way. The man has this amazingly resolute expression on his face, like he knows he can make it through this cotton field. The piece is called, "Guided," and the artist told me it was inspired by the line from Ps. 23, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, you are with me."

When we walk through our valleys. God is with us. When we face our raging storms, God is with us. When our world feels like it is on fire, God is with us. Too often in this world we are tempted to forget who we are, who created us, who guides us. Be we are called to be resolute, unwavering in our belief that the God who created us and claimed us at our baptism will not leave us in spiritual exile, but will lead us through the valley, bring about resurrection for us just as God did for Jesus.

Remember who you are. You are loved beyond measure by the God who created you, who formed you, who will go to any lengths to bring you back from exile. God created you, and through baptism God recreates you. If you have been baptized, even it was as an infant and you can't remember it, you can claim this promise. If you haven't been baptized, I'd love to talk to you about that, about what it means to be claimed by God.

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine." In a world that tries to lay claim to you in 100 different ways, tell you who you should be and what you should wear and how your worth is calculated, remember these words. Remember who you are. "You are mine."