

Through the waters

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January 13, 2013

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3: 15-22

Weeks ago when I looked ahead to these texts from the lectionary, I imagined that we would baptize Kurt and Jerome on this Sunday — when we read about Jesus' baptism. College schedules make that impossible.

Alternatively, I began imagining that we would be back in the building on East West Highway. Together we would read the promise from Isaiah, that though we have been through the waters and fire — figuratively of course — we are back in that place to which we are called.

But instead, here we are, waiting expectantly, almost as if it is still Advent. We live with expectation of return even as there are variables beyond our control. Just as we think no new delays could possibly materialize, one does. This past week we uncovered another round of asbestos when the carpet was pulled off the sanctuary platform. That is scheduled to be taken care of tomorrow. Cleaning has begun and final inspections are on target for later this coming week. (Never fear, we are still counting on unloading the storage pods this coming Saturday; we will need help from lots of you at 8:30 a.m. The plan is to worship in our building next week. Stay tuned to your email for final confirmation.)

Our waiting, to return to a newly renovated building, with “windows for light, an open door” is miniscule compared to the waiting that was part of Israel's life. That

waiting was in exile, after war. That waiting meant being wrenched from home and all that was known — and being forced to live in hostile Babylon.

It is a waiting that is replayed today, all over the world. I imagine this is what refugees from Congo, Syria, Darfur, Iraq and Afghanistan must feel as they wait and wonder when the violence will be over and they can return to the homes and land they love.

Certainly it is the experience of our sister church in Colombia. Our sisters and brothers were forced to flee for their lives, to move from their homes and farmland in the mountains to the unfamiliar coastal city of Sincelejo. Now after 10 long years, it seems to be safe enough for some folks to begin moving back to their homelands in the Montes de Maria.

After generations of waiting in exile, the words from Isaiah 43 are a balm. God says, “Do not be afraid, I call you by name, I have redeemed you.” God says, I have not forgotten you. I know who you are and I will bring you back — I will buy you back from that strange and foreign place.

And while God says, “Do not be afraid,” God does not promise to take away all the dangers or scary things of life. Isaiah does not write that the struggles will magically disappear. Instead we hear God’s voice say, “When you go through the waters, you will not drown; when you walk through fire, you will not burn. I will be there.”

In the words of assurance this morning we read two verses from Isaiah 43. Several verses later there is this:

43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; 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-"

This is God with us, God gathering back God's people, to the place where they belong.

This is the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, long before Jesus is on the scene. It sure sounds a lot like the dream that Joseph has in Matthew 1: a baby will be born and it will be called Emmanuel, God with us. Joseph must have known his scripture because this dream of his is a quote from the prophet Isaiah — chapter 7. So this is not a new idea, the possibility and promise that God is with us while we wait, while we pass through difficult times.

Fast forward from the time of Isaiah and Israel is back in the land it loves and yet the people are still waiting, waiting this time for the Messiah. Luke writes of the excitement the people feel when they hear the preaching of John the Baptist. They wonder if he can possibly be the Messiah for whom they have waited so long. And John the Baptist, though he doesn't often seem humble, says "It is not I. One who is more powerful is coming; I am not even worthy to untie the straps of his sandals."

As Christians, we understand that John is talking about Jesus. Jesus is the one who, as John promises, baptizes not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire. Luke writes that all the people are baptized and then Jesus himself is baptized. While he is praying the Holy Spirit comes upon him, looking like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Jesus' experience harkens back to what Isaiah wrote: God is present when one goes through the waters. God calls each one by name, in this case the name is "beloved son."

I know that my viewpoint may be skewed, but practically everything for me these days gets framed in the waiting, in the uncertainty of when we will move back to the renovated building. These assigned lectionary texts are a surprising gift as we prepare to go back to our home worship space.

It may seem presumptuous to read this text from Isaiah as if it applies to our own situation, as if God is speaking to us. And yet when we say that the Bible is the living word of God, this is what we mean. It is not only poetry and literature from thousands of years ago; it is not only the history of a peoples' understanding of how God works in the world; it is a living document.

We trust that within these words, written over a period of several thousand years, selected and codified over multiple generations, there is the possibility for resonance with us, that it is somehow our story as well. Even though the words were not written specifically for people in 21st century Hyattsville, we can find meaning and truth, comfort and challenge.

But let us be clear, we are not in exile, certainly not from violence or war. It is our privilege and wealth that allow us to make the choice to move to this neighboring church while we renovate the old building. We have not been scattered farther than our usual scattering from Mclean to Annapolis, from Rockville to Alexandria, from Silver Spring to Southeast. We have not literally been through fire and water — though, as chair of the building committee, David Conrad may feel like that many days.

When the people of Israel returned home after several generations in exile, there were many who did not know the home to which they were returning. Children had been born and grown up knowing only Babylon as home. They had heard the stories of course but they had to be taught to yearn for home, for freedom.

We are preparing to journey back to that old place, and even though we have been gone less than a year, there are some for whom it will be a new place. How have we continued to tell the story of God's presence among us as we sojourned in this space? How have we continued to experience God's work in the world?

It is not just the youngest among us, Amelia, Adia, Nathan, Helena and James, for whom the space will be unfamiliar. It will also be a journey to an unknown place for Dwight and Sandra, Janelle, Chelsea, Jon and Jolene, Beth and Jonathan, and others. This building is all that they know in terms of a worship space for Hyattsville Mennonite Church. How amazing that our time of waiting has brought new and vital parts of the body together. God with us, in the waiting.

While there are some parallels and many differences — we dare to claim these words from Isaiah and the story of Jesus' baptism as part of our story. As we prepare to return to the home that we left, we hear that God is with us, that God calls us each by name, that we are gathered in and we are loved.

While we say "God is with us," it is sometimes helpful to have a tangible way to experience that, to allow our bodies to feel that, especially as we prepare for a journey. During Advent we talked about the flood of mercy. This morning we read about water again. It seems an invitation to use water as sign of God's presence among us and with us.

As we sing our next song, “Down to the river to pray” I invite those who wish, to come forward to the water.

As you touch the water you might remember the waters of your birth.

You might remember the water of your baptism or look toward the waters of the new birth in baptism.

You might remember God in the flood of tears and the flood of mercy.

You might remember the power that water has to destroy and to heal, to cleanse and to quench.

Water is a mark on us that shows that we are God’s own beloved children, that we are part of the beloved community.

You are invited to come forward to touch the water, to let this little bit of God’s creation and grace run over your hands and through your fingers, God with you.

And if you would like to receive a blessing with the water please indicate that to me.

May God be with us in the waiting and in the water.