

*The Flooding Waters*  
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Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

### **Introduction to the Morning Lesson**

Have you ever felt overwhelmed by life, by work, by poor health, by suffering, by the death of loved ones, or fear of your own death? Are flood waters up to you neck ... and still rising? Do the challenges you face always feel like trial by fire and you just don't know what to do or how to cope? When we come to church we generally put on a "happy face." Rightly so, I think. But if we are honest with ourselves, I think all of us will answer "yes" to such questions. The circumstances change and the difficulties differ. But flooding waters come to everyone. Yes, there are preachers who teach that if you love Jesus enough you will always be healthy and wealthy. But those preachers are wrong. No matter how much you love Jesus, life's troubles will find you. And when they do, today's text from the prophet Isaiah is written just for you.

In the Christian calendar, Epiphany is January 6th and the first Sunday after Epiphany is called Baptism of the Lord.<sup>1</sup> The gospel lections for this Sunday describe John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River which marks the beginning of his public ministry. Remember that when Jesus came up from the baptismal waters, God's voice came from heaven and said to him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3.22b)

But instead of preaching on that gospel text today, I chose the Old Testament lesson for this Sunday. It isn't directly about Jesus' baptism. But it is about God saving us when the flooding waters threaten and ultimately that is what baptism is about. This is also a word from God that we all need to hear.

To put this passage in context, remember that in 597 BCE the Jewish Exile began when most of the leaders and the wealthy elites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.<sup>2</sup> Ten years later almost everyone else, except the poorest of the poor, were hauled off to Babylon. Then not quite six decades later in 539 BCE, the empire of Persia conquered the empire of Babylon. (And just so you know that ancient history is not unrelated to modern times, ancient Persia is roughly modern-day Iran and ancient Babylon is roughly modern-day Iraq.) The Persian king was named Cyrus and he freed the exiled Jews, many of whom returned to Jerusalem, or at least what was left of it. Today's text reflects salvation from the flooding waters and fiery trials of Exile. Let's read it in Isaiah 43.

Isaiah 43.1-7 (NRSV)

But now thus says the LORD,  
he who created you, O Jacob,

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<sup>1</sup> James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992) 30. John Chrysostom (347-407), archbishop of Constantinople, preached a sermon on January 6, 387. "But why is it not the day on which he was born, but the day on which he was baptized that is called Epiphany? For this is the day on which he was baptized, and made holy the nature of the waters ... Why then is this day called Epiphany? Because it was not when he was born that he became manifest to all but when he was baptized; for up to this day he was unknown to the multitudes."

<sup>2</sup> 2 Kings 24.14 mentions 10,000 including all the upper classes; Jeremiah 52.38-30 gives different figures.

he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.  
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.  
For 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.  
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.  
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 —  
everyone who is called by my name,  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."

If you want a list of the flooding waters and fiery trials that beset us, you don't need to look any further than our own church's ministry of prayer. As you know, most Sundays we share joys and concerns during our worship services. Some are shared out loud and some are written. The spoken joys and concerns are recorded by the elder or deacon who serves as liturgist. They are then emailed to Beth du Toit, one of our deacons, who updates the list and sends it out to all the deacons and a few dozen others on the "prayer chain."

On a recent list I counted 71 joys and concerns. Some are joys, yes, but most of them are concerns: cancers, life-threatening or debilitating diseases, divorce, accidents, addictions, depression, death. Some of these sufferings are among our own members. Some are among our family members or friends or neighbors or people we know at work or at school. There is a lot of pain on that list.

In addition to that list, there is a similar number on my personal prayer list. A young man — I still think of him as a kid but he's in his mid-40s — who used to be in my high school youth group is dying from a brain tumor. My brother, who lost his wife just over a year ago, is battling lung cancer. A former colleague is still recovering from a biking accident. My list goes on and on and I'm sure yours does too.

I mention this not to make us feel bad but simply to illustrate that even in a little community of faith like ours we are neither strangers to suffering nor immune from difficulty. And is it not often

the case that when suffering comes, we ask what have we done to deserve this? It may well be that we have not done anything. Some suffering happens because we live in a world where suffering happens. Yes, some suffering happens because we or others have done things that are wrong and irresponsible. But the point is, we are not immune.

I think that's why the Isaiah text speaks compellingly to us. We are not exiled like the ancient Jews nor recovering from exile. But when we suffer, we are anxious about our place in the world just like they were. The returning exiles didn't have much going for them except God. They were a little band of frightened people caught in the backwaters between two great empires.<sup>3</sup> But God said to them, "I have created you and formed you. I have redeemed you and called you by name. You are mine. You precious in my sight." (43.1, 4)

The Jews suffered greatly in exile: physically, emotionally, socially, and culturally. But their greatest suffering was the fear that they had been abandoned by God or never really loved by God in the first place.<sup>4</sup> When we fear that we don't count for anything or with anyone, life is hell. But when we know that we matter, especially that we matter to God, then we can endure.

Baptism is the sign that we matter. Even for Jesus, baptism was a sign: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Remember the words we say at our own baptisms: "Let us remember that the promises of God are for us. By baptism, God puts his sign on us to show that we belong to him, and gives us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that, sharing Christ's reconciling work, we will also share his victory; that, dying with Christ to sin, we will be raised with him to new life."

It's that dying part that we don't always connect with baptism. We say that baptism is dying with Christ because the apostle Paul wrote that we are "buried with [Christ] by baptism into death" so that just as he was raised from the dead, we also can "walk in newness of life." (Romans 6.4)

We probably don't think about this because we baptize with a few drops of water in a nice warm sanctuary. But when you baptize in the river, something I've done several times, when you feel the cold water of the river running by, when you go under the water or push the one being baptized beneath the waters, when you fear being swept away, and most of all when you come up from being buried in the waters of death, then you know that we are not saved by water but saved *through* the water. "When you pass through the waters," God says, "I will be with you."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes of a baptism that took place one time in a large church at the Easter Vigil. The candidate was a three-year-old girl named Ellen whose parents for some reason wanted her baptized by immersion, which was problematic in a church with a traditional birdbath

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<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-46: A Commentary*, trans. David M. G. Stalker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977) 118. If the Exiles took an honest look at themselves they would see "a tiny, miserable, and insignificant band of uprooted men and women" standing on the margins of a hostile empire. But Isaiah declares they have a new and different identity because they are people valued and honored by God.

<sup>4</sup> John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998) 137. "Whatever Israel's blindness and insensitivity may have been in the past, God says they are to forget that and concentrate on one fact: whose they are. The oracular form thus says the Lord underlines the firmness of this call. It is a call not to be afraid: Do not fear. This expression points out what would be the deepest pain of the exile, the fear that Israel's sense of identity, the glory of having been a particular people called out by the eternal God, was after all just a fantasy. Much can be endured if we have a sense of destiny borne out of a particular identity. Strip that away from us and we think going on in life is hardly worth it. The repeated "do not fear" (41.10, 13, 14; 43.1, 5; 44.1, 8) particularly addresses this issue: the fear that God has forsaken them, or worse, never was theirs in the first place."

baptismal font — just like ours. No one had asked Ellen about it, but the priest in charge accepted the challenge and finally came up with a 36-gallon garbage can that he decorated with ivy.

It was pretty if you did not look at it too hard, but it fooled no one, least of all Ellen. When she came into the dark church that night — remember that the Easter Vigil is late Saturday night before Easter — and saw “the font” sitting there in the center aisle, she stiffened. But she was a brave little girl whose parents had rehearsed her well and she did everything she was supposed to do right up until the priest leaned down to pick her up.

“Don’t do it!” she screamed

Then, planting her feet flat against the garbage can so that water slopped everywhere, she yelled again, “Don’t do it!”

Dr. Taylor said she can’t really remember what happened after that, but she will never forget the sound of that child’s voice echoing through the high rafters of the church. Yes, she was only three years old, but her instincts were good.<sup>5</sup> She knew that baptism was a baptism onto death and she wanted no part of it.

None of us wants a part in it ... except that it is through the waters that we know God loves us. For the flooding waters will surely come but God will not let us go.

Some years ago, on a hot summer day in South Florida, a little boy decided to go to the old swimming hole behind his house. In a hurry to dive into the cool water, he ran out the back door, leaving behind shoes, socks and shirt as he went. He flew into the water, not realizing that as he swam toward the middle of the lake, an alligator was swimming toward the shore. The boy’s father, working in the yard, saw the two get closer and closer together. In utter fear, he ran toward the water, yelling to his son as loudly as he could.

Hearing his dad’s voice, the little boy became alarmed and made a U-turn to swim to his father. It was too late. Just as he reached his father, the alligator reached him. From the dock, the father grabbed his little boy by the arms just as the alligator snatched his legs. That began an incredible tug-of-war between the two. The alligator was much stronger than the father, but the father was much too passionate to let go.

A farmer happened to drive by, heard screams, raced from his truck, gun in hand — in Florida everyone has a gun in their truck! He took aim and shot the alligator. Remarkably, after weeks in the hospital, the little boy survived. His legs were okay but extremely scarred by the vicious attack. And on his arms were deep scratches where his father’s fingernails dug into his flesh in an effort to hang on to the son he loved.

A newspaper reporter who interviewed the boy after the trauma asked if he would show him his scars. The boy lifted his pant legs. And then, with obvious pride in his voice, he said to the reporter, “But look at my arms. I have great scars on my arms, too. I have them because my dad wouldn’t let go.”<sup>6</sup>

My friends, none of us gets through life without some scars. But remember this in the very depth of your souls: whatever comes to you, be it flooding waters or fiery trials, believe that God will not ever — *not ever!* — let go.

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *God In Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 49.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy F. Merrill, ed., “Lord of the Seas,” *Homiletics* 22.1 (2010): 19.