

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 43:1-7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 3:15-17; 21-22
January 9, 2022

“When You Pass Through the Waters”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A shipwrecked sailor had spent several years on a deserted island. Then one morning he was thrilled to see a ship offshore and a smaller vessel pulling out toward him. When the boat grounded on the beach, the officer in charge handed the marooned sailor a bundle of newspapers and told him, “With the captain's compliments. He said to read through these and let us know if you still want to be rescued.”

I think I might have said come back in two years and let me know how things are!

New beginnings often involve shipwrecks. I remember God speaking to me through these very words of scripture from Isaiah in a time of great pain and turmoil. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” At that point I was 32. I knew my marriage was over and I was on my own with three children. Thank heavens I had my family. I did not know what was ahead. But God assured me, “I will be with you.”

We generally want “new” without pain. We all want this new year to be good, even though we are getting a bit jaundiced because we had high expectations for 2020 and 2021 too, and look how that turned out! And unfortunately for us even things that are 100% good bring some pain with them because they involve degrees of adjustment, and adjusting to new things is hard. The birth of a baby is wonderful. It will also completely turn your life upside down and inside out. Getting married is wonderful! Living with another personality day in and day out can be a trial.

People were looking for a Messiah to fix everything and hand perfection to them on a plate. John the Baptist had a very different message. They were looking for deliverance and he was calling for repentance. And repentance is not just feeling a little bit sorry for things we have done wrong. Repentance is a complete turnaround. To repent is to change. John called people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins—to become part of God’s new kingdom. God’s kingdom wasn’t going to just come with human beings as passive recipients. God’s kingdom requires our personal and costly transformation. John warned the people that the Messiah was going to bring change, saying, “But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His

winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

To understand these words, we need to first understand some basic ancient farming practices. John used imagery that would have been vivid and familiar to his audience, but for us it's just plain strange. A threshing floor is a large, hard-packed surface where oxen pull a heavy sledge over sheaves of wheat to break them up so that the grain can be separated from the lighter inedible parts of the plant called chaff. Threshing floors were sometimes elevated, because in the ancient world wind provided a vital part of the process. Farmers would take winnowing forks after the sheaves had been crushed, similar to pitchforks, and throw this mix up in the air. The chaff would blow away. The heavier grain would fall to the ground. Needless to say, the whole process was incredibly laborious. I'm amazed anyone made bread! John said Jesus' winnowing fork was in his hand to separate out the good from the bad and burn the useless chaff. After winnowing the farmer would gather the grain into barns to store and protect it from the elements. It was a perfect metaphor for judgment day.

John performed water baptism, but he said that Jesus would baptize us with the Holy Spirit and fire. The word baptism refers to being immersed or even overwhelmed. Water baptism is symbolic. But the baptism of Jesus—the baptism of the Holy Spirit, is quite another matter. When the Holy Spirit comes upon a person the experience is like someone just switched on a very bright light in a very dirty room. Everything it was possible to ignore in dim light becomes impossible to ignore. There are two choices. Turn out the light—or clean the house.

Jesus wants us to get rid of the chaff in our lives—all those wasted broken things that serve no good purpose. Things that do not feed our spirit because in truth they are inedible. They are bad for us. They take up space and clutter our lives. The Spirit and fire of God do not destroy us. They only destroy the things that will harm us. They purify and restore. But it can be a painful process. Giving up gossip when it makes us feel better about ourselves by pointing out the flaws of others is hard. Letting go of alcohol or drugs is really hard, even when they have destroyed our lives and the lives of our family members. Rejecting pornography, acknowledging that we are too proud or too rigid or too selfish, becoming honest on our taxes, changing the way we do business, forgiving someone who has wronged us and letting go of bitterness, all of these things and more are hard. God makes it possible, but it is never easy. And God's housecleaning doesn't have to involve dramatic and obvious things. God knows what is in our hearts and minds and that spotlight finds ALL the dirt.

John the Baptist was not known for his gentleness and tact. He was blunt and forceful. He spoke about judgment. We are only interested in judgment when it concerns our enemies and those who have committed heinous crimes. We want judgment rendered against OTHERS. But John says that we must face the truth about ourselves, because we are supremely imperfect beings. When it comes to ourselves we have blind spots. The failures of others are so obvious! Ourselves . . . not so much. We say we want justice, but not when it might call us to account. Baptism signifies separation from

evil, and every child who is baptized must come to affirm that baptism for himself, herself or their self as an adult. We are all called to turn away from the darkness and turn towards the light.

The most surprising thing about the story we read today is that Jesus was baptized by John. If John's baptism was about repentance and Jesus had no need of repentance, then why be baptized? Luke's gospel is very brief in its description of Jesus' baptism, saying only that he was baptized and afterward "the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" Luke's focus is on Jesus' anointing by the Holy Spirit. It is about empowerment for service. The voice from heaven echoes words from Psalm 2. During the Davidic dynasty the words of Psalm 2:7 "You are my son; today I have become your father" or "begotten you," was used for the coronations of kings. Over 500 years after the fall of David's line the meaning had become eschatological. The king became the Messiah, or anointed one, and for Christians both Jesus' baptism with water and the Holy Spirit coming upon him like a dove meant the divine anointing of the Messiah. In Luke's understanding Jesus' baptism was essentially a commissioning.

The other possible reason for Jesus' baptism, of course, is his full identification with us. Matthew's gospel includes John the Baptist trying to stop Jesus by saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" and Jesus replying, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus did not have to be baptized, but he was for our sake. He became incarnate and took on sinful human nature. He was baptized as an act of oneness with us.

When we pass through the waters of trial or baptism God will be with us. Isaiah didn't say "if" you pass through the waters, Isaiah said "when." It's going to happen. Being a Christian is not always easy. Our Heavenly Father has high standards, standards which we can never meet. But with the Holy Spirit at work in us to open our eyes to truth, we can change and heal. We can grow spiritually. We can become more Christlike in our behavior and in our thoughts. And we can do so because we know that nothing will ever separate us from God's love and grace. God will never abandon us. No matter what happens, God will be with us. Amen.

Isaiah 43:1-7

But now, this is what the Lord says—

he who created you, Jacob,

he who formed you, Israel:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

² When you pass through the waters,

I will be with you;

and when you pass through the rivers,

they will not sweep over you.

When you walk through the fire,

you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
Cush and Seba in your stead.
⁴ Since you are precious and honored in my sight,
and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
I will bring your children from the east
and gather you from the west.
⁶ I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'
Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the ends of the earth—
⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."