

Hespeler, 13 January, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 43:1-7, Psalm 29:1-11, Acts 8:14-17, Luke 3:15-22

It is kind of amazing the difference that one little word can make. Our reading this morning from the Book of Isaiah begins with a pretty amazing promise. **“Do not fear,”** God says through the prophet, **“for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”** Can you even imagine what is being said here? The eternal creator, the ruler of the cosmos and the King of all kings reaches out to a people who are lost, confused and distressed and God chooses them.

And it is not just in that passage; it is a theme that runs through all of our lectionary readings this morning. Why are the people flocking to John the Baptist out in the wilderness? They are there because they are filled with expectation. God is doing something and they are being baptised because they want to be part of it. In that baptism, they are experiencing the same thing – God’s redemption, calling them by name and claiming them. This is made even more explicit in the case of Jesus who is claimed by God in spectacular fashion after his baptism with the words, **“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”**

This is good news, right? This is a wonderful promise. Think of all the benefits of having the creator of the universe choose you specially and call you by name. No more worries, no more fears. With a patron as big as the Creator, it’s bound to be smooth sailing from here, right? Surely if there is any trouble, God will get me out of it right away.

But there’s that little word” *if*. That should be the next thing that the prophet talks about, right? *If* anything goes wrong. *If* I have to pass through a difficult thing, then God will bail me out. But is that what the prophet says? Oh, he goes on to talk about trouble, but he doesn’t use that little word: *if*. Here is what the prophet 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.”**

Hold on a minute here God, I thought you redeemed me, I thought you called me by name and were even willing to pay a hefty ransom for me, what do you mean *when*? It’s like you’re threatening me with dangerous river crossings and passing through fiery infernos. What exactly are you planning for me to do?

And here is where we actually get to the point that is being made in these passages. Does God call people, redeem them and make them his own? Yes, absolutely. But that calling and redeeming, though it always comes out of the gracious and



giving spirit of God, also always has a purpose. God has something for his chosen ones to do. In this specific passage in the Book of Isaiah, the thing that God is calling his people to do is the very difficult task of bringing a nation together out of exile, of carrying out a dangerous journey through a deserted place. So clearly the issue is not that they *might* face dangerous situations on that journey. It is a certainty that they *will*. So the prophet doesn't talk about *if*; he talks about *when*.

It is the same thing in our New Testament readings as well. These words resounding from heaven after Jesus' baptism, "**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,**" are a high point in the recognition of Jesus as God's anointed one, but we all know where that is heading, don't we? It is heading to the cross and a long and difficult journey to get there. Whatever the benefits of being God's chosen one, a trouble-free journey is not one of them. And that is not just true of Jesus; it is also true of all those who follow Jesus through baptism.

I often think that this is the main thing that we miss in the church today. The Christian Church has an important message – a message of redemption and hope and love that has the potential to transform the world. It is a fantastic message that the world definitely needs. So if people aren't coming and choosing to be part of sharing in such a message, it is certainly not the fault of the message.

And if people aren't coming in droves, like they did when John the Baptist proclaimed the message, it is clearly not the fault of God. God is committed, it says, "**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.'**"

So, if the message is still valid and God is that committed to gathering God's people in, why don't we always see that happening? What did John the Baptist (who apparently attracted "**all the people**") have that we don't?

Well, I think that one of the problems is that we have become "*if*" Christians instead of "*when*" Christians. We appreciate our Christian faith and the message of the gospel that we have received and we especially appreciate it *if* we face hard times. *If* we have to pass through fire or flood, it is good to know that we have a God who is committed to us, a Christian community that will support us and love us and a message of good news that will comfort our hearts.

And, in a sense, there is nothing wrong with that. It is a very good thing to be able to draw on that support *if* tragedy should befall us and it is a blessing to have that assurance. But *if* Christians are not necessarily the Christians who are going to change the world. For that you need *when* Christians.

*When* Christians are the ones who understand that the gospel message is not just there to support us in those difficult times that may happen. They understand that following Christ and being faithful to his gospel will, sooner or

later, lead us into situations that are not exactly comfortable. Following the example of Christ with integrity will sometimes mean standing up for the forgotten, the despised and the oppressed. And when you do that, you will find that it is not possible without displeasing many people. It means that sometimes people won't like you and that can feel like you are passing through fire and flood.

*When* Christians understand that the gospel message is a message of salvation by grace through faith. God's love and forgiveness and hope come to us as gifts that we can only receive with thanks – that we cannot earn. But we do receive those gifts through faith and faith means trust. It means that we need to learn to trust God for our most important needs. And, guess what, that doesn't come easily to us. We would rather be in control of our own lives and not to have to rely on somebody else (even if it be the Creator of the universe). Giving up that control is hard – for some of us it can feel as hard as passing through fire or flood.

*When* Christians know that the Christian life is not intended to be lived out alone – that we are actually called to live it out in a community – to love and support one another. And that is a blessing in so many ways – it makes life that much richer. But, guess what, other people (even when they are Christians – maybe especially when they are Christians) are not perfect. We sometimes don't agree or see things in the same way. That diversity, when we work through it, is meant to enrich us, but sometimes working through it can be hard and we may hurt one another and tear each other down. We may need to forgive each other to make it work. And that is hard. In other words, there *will* be times when living together as the church will be like passing through fire or flood.

*When* Christians also understand that this message of the gospel is not just good news for you, it is not just something to hold onto and cherish for the benefits that it gives you. It is a message that demands that it be shared. And I don't necessarily mean by that that you need to be constantly going up to people and asking them questions like, "Have you been saved?" "Have you been born again?" Actually, I think that kind of in-your-face approach tends to have quite the opposite effect – it gets in the way of effective sharing of the gospel. No I am talking about a real mutual kind of sharing, where you are actually interested in what other people think and feel and believe and are also willing to share your own faith when the opportunities arise.

Many of us don't do that – would never even tell someone else what you did on a Sunday morning or what God is doing in your life. I understand the hesitation, of course I do. Such genuine sharing can make you feel very vulnerable. It can feel as scary as having to pass through fire or flood, but taking those kinds of risks are also what it means to follow in the way of Christ.

*When* Christians understand that trouble is an inevitable part of the Christian life. They don't seek out conflict or trouble, of course. They don't stir it up for fun. But they expect that their walk with Christ will lead them through

fire or flood at some point. They don't complain when it comes because they expect it. Neither do they worry or fear when it happens because they remember God's promise: "**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.**" They know that fire and flood are not things to avoid at all costs; they are not an *if*, they are a *when*.

And I think that this is what we often miss and it gets in the way of the church being all that it is meant to be. We think of fire and flood as things that *might* happen. They are *ifs* for us. And if they are *ifs*, well, then they can be avoided and so we spend so much of our energy avoiding conflict, avoiding anything that might make somebody not like us, avoiding anything makes us feel vulnerable. If we understood that fire and flood are things that will happen, sooner or later, in the Christian walk, maybe we could draw on God's promises and pass through them to new strengths and new beginnings.

I certainly see that as one of the foundations of the success of John the Baptist. He didn't sugar-coat anything. In fact, he seems to have intentionally made it hard for people. He set up shop way out in the wilderness. It was a difficult and dangerous journey just to get there and once you got there, there was nothing to sustain you. He also threw them into the flood of the Jordan and promised them that a baptism of fire was coming. Whatever he was calling them to, it was not going to be easy. And yet they came – they came in droves, "**all the people**" it says.

It doesn't seem to make sense. We assume that if you tell people the road is going to be difficult, they will stay away, but John found the opposite. We, on the other hand, try to make the Christian life as easy as possible and often find that people aren't particularly attracted to that.

Why did John's approach work so well? First of all, because he was telling the truth and people could tell. The life of faith will lead through fire and flood sometimes. Secondly, he told them that the promises of God could be trusted: "**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.**" But most of all, he showed them that the path, though difficult, was worthwhile – that going through the fire and flood meant something. It led to hope, life and new beginnings. Yes, I think we could learn a lot from John.