



Sermons from
First Presbyterian Church

“Passing Through Troubled Waters”

The Rev. Evans L McGowan

January 13, 2013 (8AM & 5:05 PM Services)

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43: 1-7

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Gracious and Loving God, pour out your Spirit upon us, among us and within us this day, that the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts, be honored and cherished in your sight, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I was driving too fast that day. I was just so happy! My girlfriend and I were celebrating 2 years of dating, a year of which I had been overseas in Kenya. We had just spent the afternoon upon a bald hill amidst the beautiful Smokey mountains. I had recently purchased my dream car, a six-speed turbo charged Toyota Matrix. I let up a little on the brakes, shifted out of a lower gear, and let the momentum of the car, of life itself, carry us along the gravel road, snaking our way down the mountain. One curve too fast and the back wheels fishtailed one way; I overcompensated the other. And then just when I thought I had it all under control, my side of the car dropped out from underneath me, and we rolled sideways down the mountain.

It's times like these when we call for help. As the writer Anne LaMott says, there's really only two kinds of prayer: Help Me, Help Me, Help Me, and Thank You, Thank You, Thank You. We've all experienced a time in our lives when we need help, when life has gotten out of control, when we are at a loss of words or loss what to do. We long for the place where everyone knows our name, but now will take someone, anyone, to call our name, to rescue us, to claim us as their own.

Isaiah gives this comfort to his people. As the mouthpiece of God, Isaiah reminds the Israelites and us who created and formed us, who is with us always. The rivers of life will not drown you, nor the fires of life consume you. Yet notice: our God does not promise we will go through life unharmed. There is not a bridge over troubled waters. We **will** *pass through* the waters. We **will** *walk through* the fires of life.

The car rolled down the mountain one and a half times, the roof caving in between us, before coming to a stop on its side against a tree. Emily and I survived the tumble down the mountain that day with hardly a scratch. The car? Not so much. Yet the trauma of that experience, of passing through those waters, of walking through that fire, would last for many years.

These words from Isaiah are comforting words, for we survivors, for those of us here today. Claimed by God, we are reminded of our baptism, of already dying to our own self and living in Christ. The Lord has redeemed us, and many of us are comforted by these words, that our eternal salvation is secured, and that the dead rest in peace.

In times of crisis and pain, we all want words of assurance, a firm foundation of faith, that we will survive this ordeal, that “everything will be okay.” And it’s not just we pastors who want to say it; as parents wish to say to their children, as a teacher to his students, as a doctor to her patients... In countless ways we want to assure one another that everything will turn out right, that everything will be okay.

Yet my preaching professor in seminary told us there was one thing we should never say in a sermon, and that was, “Everything will be all right.” We thought this was a message of hope, and so we asked, “Why not say it?” He said, “You don’t know that! You don’t know everything will be all right in the lives of everyone who hears you! Do not give the people false hope.”

For the truth is, we don't know if everything will turn out all right. Sometimes a teacher is able to talk down a would-be shooter. Another time a teacher sacrifices her life to protect her students. There are no guarantees on the road of life, only that there are roadblocks and potholes, detours we must manage without driving off the road.

Our final destination may be secured, but what about the struggles we face today? We are encouraged not to fear, but is Isaiah giving the people – giving *us* – a false hope? What do say to those among us who are graduates but still unemployed, to the spouses who miss their partners, to the parents who have lost a child, or the children who have lost a parent? How do we respond to ongoing violence in our schools and wars across the land, to women sexually violated routinely in India and all over the world, to addicts and their families debilitated by the snare of addiction, to those receiving a terminal diagnosis? What true hope do we have to share, in *this* life?

In a world where the fire does burn and the waters do overwhelm, “Everything will be okay” just doesn't cut it.

I do not have a theological answer for you today, but I do have a true story to share. There are few places more full of fleeting hope than modern day Israel-Palestine. Israeli soldiers often hitchhike to get around Israel, and most citizens readily give them rides. One day, a group of Palestinian militants disguised themselves as Jews and abducted one such soldier, beating and eventually killing him. Yuval Roth grieved for his brother, and eventually reached out to Palestinians who had also lost a family member in the conflict. In these meetings, in opening up his heart to others in deep pain and unfathomable loss, he discovered a common concern.

Along the border, Israel allowed sick Palestinian children to cross for treatment, as hospitals in the West Bank are prohibitively expensive. However, parents and their cars are not allowed to

cross, and taxis cost \$100, too much for most Palestinians. One day, a Palestinian man called Yuval to ask if he would give a ride to his daughter who was desperately sick. Yuval had a choice, to be angry or to forgive, to withhold God's grace or to extend it to this person in need. He chose to reach out to this man, this new brother, and later his efforts grew to a team of 200 Israelis helping to shuttle sick Palestinian children to and from Israeli hospitals for free.

I imagine Yuval driving these young children to the hospital, adopting them for a time as his own, and singing,

“When times get rough and friends just can't be found,

Like a bridge over troubled waters, I will lay me down” (*Simon & Garfunkel* – 8 AM)

“I got soul but I'm not a soldier. I got soul but I'm not a soldier...” (*The Killers* – 5:05)

One day, sometime later, an Israeli soldier was separated from his patrol in the West Bank, and found himself about to be set upon by a group of Palestinians. Suddenly a man appeared and took him away, eventually delivering him back to the border and to Yuval. Upon seeing him off, the Palestinian man said to the Israeli soldier, “You are alive today because this man,” pointing to Yuval, “took my little girl to the hospital.”

I want to close with a recent dream I had. The other night I dreamed a dream about my grandfather. He was on a rollercoaster and looked a little confused and scared, but also excited. I waited for the ride to end, doing my best not to worry about him. When he got off the rollercoaster, I ran to him and we embraced. “I thought I'd lost you,” I said. “I'm right here,” he responded. I looked up and we were under a cherry blossom tree – strange, because I knew it was winter, and stranger still as I noticed the blossoms growing not just on the leaves of the tree but right along the sides of the branches and trunk, in vivid HD of pink and white hues. We fell down, still embraced, in a bed of blossoms. With my head firmly tucked into his neck, tears streamed out, soaking my cheeks as if I had dipped my face in a pool of cool water. I managed

to get out: “I just want to know, if I made you proud. If I was the eldest grandson, you hoped I would be.” He squeezed me even tighter, and said, “I love you, so much.”

My grandfather passed away five years ago.

We are not alone at the wheel of life. When things get out of control, there are other hands to grab the wheel: the hand of God, and the hands of others. Wherever we go, God is in the midst of tragedy, of comedy, of all things human and non-human, the mundane and the divine. There is nowhere, no height or depth, things living or dead, time past or present or future, nothing real or imagined, where the Spirit of God is not present and will not let you go.

Christ is present at all times and in all places. As the hands and feet of Christ, how are we present with one another? Bad things happen. Waters flood. Fires rage. In these times, we have the grace-filled opportunity to embody, to extend and to embrace each other and the very presence of our Living Lord.

Children of God, may the Spirit fill your hearts in the glowing warmth of courage and swelling river of love, as you hear these words from your Maker:

You are precious and honored in my sight; I love you.

You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased.

To God be all Glory and Honor. Amen.

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