

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Luke 3:15-22  
January 10, 2010

### Passed Through the Waters

When I was growing up in Bethany Presbyterian Church in Huntington Station Long Island and involved with the music program; one of the hot new trends in Presbyterian Churches was folk choirs. By today's church music standards a lot of the stuff we sang back then, was what I will call sappy seventies music. There was this pastor choir director duo who served the Reformed Church in Port Jarvis New York called Donald Avery and Richard Marsh. They were quite well known. Avery was the pastor and Marsh the music director. People referred to the pair as Avery Marsh and in fact we use their version of the Doxology at least once a month in the 9:30 service. One of their songs was called, Passed Through the Waters Rebecca is going to sing verse one for us. The end of the chorus line goes like this . "I have passed through the waters and that's all that matters, I have passed through the waters O thanks be to God." In their song, they describe baptism as passing through the waters.

The first Sunday after Epiphany is the Sunday when lectionary and liturgical churches celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. The Baptism

of Jesus is a perplexing story for many people, because if Jesus was God and God's Son then why would he need to be baptized? Even more perplexing is the fact that John the Baptist declared in his preaching that his baptism was a baptism "of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," not even a baptism to join the movement. Why would the Son of God need to pass through the waters of baptism? Strangely enough our answer may come in giving our attention to an Old Testament passage from the book of Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah is actually a composite work of three prophets who lived in three different times. Second Isaiah, as the scholars call him, lived and preached and ministered to the people of Israel who were in exile in the Babylonian kingdom in the fifth century BC. He wrote chapters 40 to 55 in the book. When the Babylonian empire invaded Israel at the beginning of the fifth century BC, they put thousands and thousands of people to death. They burned Jerusalem to the ground. They literally leveled every town and city in a twenty mile radius of Jerusalem and they made maybe 200000 people homeless.<sup>1</sup> They grabbed all the leaders, artists and business folk of Israel and their families and they forcibly relocated

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright – The History of Israel

them to settlements near their Capital City – maybe 20,000 Jews. The country, the people, the religion were devastated. Second Isaiah wrote his book for an utterly dejected depressed people. Post traumatic stress disorder abounded. Hope was in short order. The future looked dismal. The anxiety that the people felt was like drowning. The water was over their heads. It was psychologically like a great flood. You remember the Tsunami of Dec 26 2004 which killed 100,000's of thousands of people. This is what the Babylonian Invasion felt like to Israelites. The fire that Isaiah writes of, was every one of them remembering their homes being burnt to the ground by the Babylonian army.

This painting is contemporary and by Artist Edvard Munch and is called the scream; but it captures the agony of the exile.

The passage we read from Isaiah is in God's voice. Isaiah hears God talking intimately to his people and he records it for us. God is kind and soothing and God is telling Israel you are precious in my sight. God is like a mother soothing a hurt child. God tells Israel and God tells us that when we pass through fire and flood God Godself is there to protect us. God is with us when we pass through

the flood waters of chaos. God tells us we are not alone. Not only are we accompanied, but we are precious in God's sight.

Interestingly enough God's love and protection do not include shields, inoculations or prevention of anxiety. Pain and crises are not warded away. Frustratingly enough God's promise is that God is with us when we come to these places; not that God will intervene and stop these things from happening. Some chaos is the result of our stupidity or our willingness to do wrong. Some chaos is the result of other people's insensitivity, evil or proclivity for doing wrong but in both cases; God promises only love and accompaniment, no deterrence. The protection that God offers is that through it all, however deep it gets, we do not go it alone. The protection that God offers is that there is a well of goodness from which we can draw life, when circumstances make places in our hearts dead and lifeless. Sometimes God gives us just enough help to get us to the other side of chaos so that we may begin to heal.

No doubt many of you have read or seen the movies *The Lord of the Rings*. The story was created by JRR Tolkien the Catholic friend of CS Lewis. In these stories Frodo the Hobbit is one of the Christ characters. Hobbits are half pints thought by most people to

be only mythological beings. Frodo puts his life on the line. He leaves the paradise of the Shire to save world from evil. In the first book and movie *The Fellowship of the Ring* – he is attacked early on by powerful evil shadow kings one of whom stabs him with poison in the shoulder. He is close to death in this scene.

## **Show the Clip**

Evil is washed away by the river waters of Elrond the master of Elves and health. The rushing waters cleanse the world and keep evil at bay long enough for good to regroup.

Jesus gets into the Jordan River with John the Baptist. The order of the story seems to be poorly redacted by whoever edited the final copy of the book of Luke. We are left wondering whether John the Baptist is in Prison or in the river baptizing Jesus. The other Gospels make it clearer that John conducted the baptism.

If we could use our faith imaginations to just play with all this water right now; let us imagine that the rivers stand for the chaos there is in life. At times our lives are invaded and what we know or what we seem to know is burnt down to the ground. Babylon strikes. Turmoil ensues.

While sport fishing off the Florida coast, a tourist capsized his boat. He could swim, but his fear of alligators kept him clinging to the overturned craft. Spotting an old beachcomber on the shore, the tourist shouted, "Are there any gators around here?" The old beachcomber laughs to himself (alligators are not ocean creatures) "Naw," the man hollered back. "They ain't been around for years!" Feeling safe, the tourist started swimming leisurely toward the shore. About halfway there, he asked, "How'd you get rid of the gators?" "We didn't do nothin'," the beachcomber said. "The sharks got 'em.

As in the parable of Noah, at times our lives are flooded and we find ourselves drowning in our circumstances. Chaos overpowers us and we find ourselves wounded. It might be a toxic relationship. It might be the job, an accident or death. Baptism, our public profession of our faith does not stop any of these things from happening. For some this indicates a failure by God or proof of God's impotence or that God is merely a fancy of our collective imaginations.

Jesus however was baptized and executed. Before Jesus was baptized he was born of Mary. He stepped from paradise into the mayhem that is human life. God became one of us in order to be

closer to us. Jesus was baptized as an act of solidarity. Jesus was baptized because just like all of us he was surrounded by the tumultuous complexities of human life. Jesus was baptized to mark the beginning of his ministry to humanity. A voice is heard from heaven. "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased." Jesus is as precious to God as God's people Israel. Jesus is commissioned.

If we can use our faith imaginations to play with all this water then we can imagine our baptisms to be like the healthy cleansing waters that Arwen called forth in the movie. God doesn't promise no bumps bruises or tragedy, but God does promise us that in our baptisms, we are guarded from evil. In the end evil does not have power over us. God has the last word and God's intention is to cleanse and restore every one of us to health.

In Isaiah God promises that God will redeem his people from slavery, that God will make a trade to redeem his people. In Old Testament days, you could find yourself in slavery if you couldn't pay your debts. If someone bought your freedom – they redeemed you. It comes across a bit nationalistic and narrow in the Isaiah, text but God promises an exchange to lift up and free the exiled people of

Israel. In Jesus it become clear what the exchange was all about. The trade off that God made was to come to humanity in Jesus. When we are baptized in Jesus' name we trade off loneliness for new life. When we have passed through the waters, God promises to soothe our screams and always to be at our side.

The Second Verse Goes like this

Like small children washed and clean or drowned to live again

Like people drowned and brought to life again

We are washed we are saved, we are risen from the grave.

We are Baptized I am baptized

we have passed through the waters

and that's all that matters

we have passed through the waters oh Thanks be to God<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Passed Through The Waters by Richard Avery and Donald Mmarsh 1971 – The Avery and Marsh Songbook page 21.