

## Through the Waters

This is a good week for me to be a preacher. As most of you know, I like the preaching discipline of following the lectionary. The list of four passages of Scripture selected for each Sunday and repeated in a three-year cycle does a pretty good job of hitting the highlights throughout the Old and New Testaments and preventing preachers from falling into the trap of preaching their own “Top 40” or less over and over again. The lectionary also provides a sense of Christian unity. Although it is not followed by every preacher in every denomination, there are enough around the world who do that you have a pretty good chance, in conversation most weeks with friends from other churches, to discover that you heard sermons on identical passages or at least similar themes. Most preachers share the fantasy that our congregations actually talk about what we’ve said for the rest of the week after Sunday.

Because there are some denominational differences in even the Revised Common Lectionary, those of us in the “free church” tradition, who are not beholden to bishops or synods to follow their prescribed track, sometimes have more than the normal four passages – Old Testament, Psalm, Gospel, and Epistle – from which to choose. And on weeks like this, when a significant Feast of the Church falls mid-week, folks like me who use the lectionary but are not tied to it, have a real field day. This week, because the Feast of the Epiphany fell on Wednesday, I had the choice of the story of Magi and associated passages or of the Baptism of Jesus or, being a good Baptist, going my own way entirely.

A few weeks ago, when I was planning the early stages of this calendar year, I decided what really intrigued me was the Old Testament passage for the First Sunday after Epiphany, the passage from Isaiah which I just read and which is matched in the lectionary with Luke’s telling of the baptism story. I have preached many times before on Jesus’ baptism and what it means to us as well as on the story of the Magi and I’ll draw a bit on those stories this morning, too. But I want to focus on God’s word through Isaiah to the exiles. How would this pronouncement and promise have been received by those yearning to escape Babylonian captivity? How did this pericope come to be associated with the baptism of Jesus by John? And what is the word here for us today both corporately and individually?

To begin with, a few words about the book of the prophet Isaiah are in order. Although its form in the Bible obscures this truth, it has been recognized for centuries by Jewish and Christian scholars alike that the work of at least two and probably three prophets and their followers are represented in these sixty-six chapters. The most commonly recognized breakdown is that the first portion of the book, chapters one through thirty-nine, were written by Isaiah in the Eighth century before the Common Era, serving a warning to the kings and people of Judah that their lifestyle and political choices were about to catch up with them by means of invasions from the imperial powers of their day. Some two hundred years later, an unnamed prophet influenced by Isaiah and often referred to as “Deutero-Isaiah,” or “Second Isaiah,” wrote chapters forty through fifty-five to the exiles in Babylon with God’s promise that their days of captivity were nearly over, that they would return to their ancestral home, and that they would fulfill their destiny to be a blessing from God through Abraham on the whole world. “Trito-Isaiah” or “Third Isaiah” then picks up this theme in chapters 56 through 66, likely written after the return to Judea.

Our passage comes from Deutero-Isaiah, the promises of coming delivery to the Jews in Babylon. The prophet begins this section of his message by reminding the people of God’s long

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history of care for them. God addresses them by their ancient family names: “Jacob” and “Israel.” Although these names had come to be most associated with the Northern Kingdom, wiped off the map by Assyria through conquest and exile, God uses them to remind the people that they are still heirs to the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, to Isaac and Rebecca, to Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Whole sections of the family may be missing but they are still to expect the blessing.

The prophet also recalls the key events in the salvation history of Israel. God led them through the waters, both through the Red Sea as they fled Egypt and through the Jordan River as they entered the Promised Land. God led them as a pillar of fire, a fire which blessed and did not consume just as the fire of God’s presence did not consume the bush before Moses. Nor have the children of Israel been consumed by the fires of war, dreadful though those have been, or been overwhelmed by conquering armies as the sands are overwhelmed by the waters of the sea.

Having re-established God’s care for them in the minds of the people, the prophet turns to promises of future blessing. In order to secure Israel’s safety, God is willing to “give for ransom” Egypt, Sheba, and Ethiopia. In the actuality of history, Persia defeated Babylon, Egypt, and the rest, which allowed the exiles to return to their land under the more enlightened rule of the Persian emperors, who believed that happy people allowed to live and worship in relative peace were more easily ruled. Those older empires were given in ransom to Persia for Israel. But we must see this promise in light of First Isaiah’s proclamation in chapter 19 that all the great powers of the Middle East, for him represented by Egypt, Assyria, and Israel, will someday all worship God and bless the world together. This is not the blanket condemnation of Israel’s rivals and persecutors so common in the Old Testament. I will return to this idea in a few minutes.

Deutero-Isaiah also lifts up God’s promise that not only will the exiles in Babylon be restored to the Promised Land but that also those lost in the Assyrian dispersion as well as those who have fled to other lands on their own will be reunited in the blessings to come. God says, “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...” Again, this has a deeper, eschatological meaning as well.

It is easy to understand why the scholars who devised the Revised Common Lectionary connected this passage in Isaiah with the celebration of Jesus’ baptism. Just as the Children of Israel in the time of Second Isaiah connected “passing through the waters” with divine salvation from times of trouble, so has the Church recognized passing through the waters of baptism as an act of faith by those who trust in God’s salvation. Whether, as we Baptists tend to believe, that act is one engaged in by one who claims that gift of God for oneself or whether, as some of our sisters and brothers believe, it is an act performed on behalf of one whom the community claims on behalf of God and intends to raise in discipleship, the act of passing through the waters is deeply meaningful for all Christians. We remember, as Paul wrote to the Romans, that we are buried with Christ in baptism. We remember that we are subject to death just as he was on the cross but we also remember that we are raised with him to walk in newness of life.

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Our passage in Isaiah also connects with the utterance of God at the baptism of Jesus. The promise, “I have called you by name, you are mine,” is fulfilled in the Christ-event in Luke as, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Although there is no corresponding tradition for us in the Baptist Movement, our brothers and sisters who baptize their infants also use that same ceremony to officially bestow a name on the child. But all of us, from the early church forward, have recognized God’s claim on us in the rite of baptism. All of us recognize that we have been called by God into God’s kingdom, the Beloved Community.

As we begin to connect this passage in Isaiah with God’s word for us in this time and place, we must be careful that we do not merely appropriate it as a whole and claim that God’s message for us is the same as God’s message for the exiled Children of Israel. Although there is a universal element in all of our sacred texts, there are also those elements in each book, each passage, that can only be truly understood when read in light of their original audience. I am thinking especially today in terms of verses 3 & 4 of Isaiah 43: “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.”

There are those in our country who will blithely say that the United States of America is a Christian nation, founded on Christian principles, and is therefore the new Israel, the current repository of God’s favor and recipient of God’s promised blessings. These same folk would have us believe that all Muslims, indeed all peoples in nations where Islam is a prominent religious force, are in league with Satan or Antichrist or some other evil. They would be all too happy for us to understand Isaiah 43:3-4 to be literally applicable to our time. But they miss some very important considerations.

First, we are not a nation of exiles, held captive by a greater imperial power. The United States is the greatest military and economic power of our time. Christians are guaranteed freedom of religion – no one threatens us with death for following the dictates of our conscience as regards worship and prayer as was the case for the exiles in Babylon. We are not enslaved and forced to build bricks without straw as were the Children of Israel in Egypt. In fact, if anything, our nation is the geopolitical equivalent of the Egypt, the Assyria, the Babylon, the Persia of its time. We dare not appropriate God’s promise to the exiled and the downtrodden.

Second, the fate of the imperial nations in the vision of the combined Isaiahs is ambiguous. Yes, God says that God will give up Egypt and Ethiopia and Sheba as ransom for Israel but God also says in Isaiah, early and late, that God calls to all nations to come to the throne of God for mercy and healing. In addition to the vision of Isaiah 19, to which I referred earlier, there is the vision of Isaiah 25 in which a feast for all peoples is promised on Mount Zion and also the vision of the final verses of the book which predict that all nations will send gifts to Jerusalem. Some, it says, will bear their gifts on camels, which many Christians have traditionally connected with the gifts of the Magi brought to Jesus. The three kings are a symbol of the salvation of the Gentiles through Christ. If nations can expect in the justice of God to pay the consequences of their actions on other, weaker nations, then nations can also expect, in the mercy of God, to be brought into the flock of God’s sheep in due time.

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But if we have to be careful in claiming this word of God to Israel for ourselves corporately, we can wholeheartedly claim it for ourselves individually. We can claim God's promise of redemption and of ultimate safety in the face of trouble. Please notice, God does not promise God's people a trouble-free life. God does, as in our opening Psalm this morning and the song that came after, promise to give us strength. God does, as in the hymn we sang before the Scripture reading, promise that we will be covered by grace even in fiery trial. "The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." But we recognize that in baptism, God has named us and claimed us as God's own. In this way, we are made heirs to the promises of God to Israel.

We must also recognize a challenge to us in the words of Isaiah. "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." Whether they come from the north, the south, the east, or the west, those created by God are God's sons and daughters and our brothers and sisters. We may not refuse them hospitality, see them hungry and not feed them, see them naked and not clothe them, hear of their distress and not comfort them. We are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be our brothers' keepers. To claim God's promises implies a relationship to God far deeper than simply taking what is on offer.

The authors of what we know as the book of Isaiah, whoever they were, wrote to God's people in particular times and particular places with particular problems. As we examine those inspired, God-breathed words, we find that there are indeed challenges and reassurances for us. We, too, live in the real world, with real troubles, some very personal, others stretching far beyond our ability to solve or even to comprehend. But through it all, God promises that God will be with us. Indeed, we celebrate the incarnation of God With Us, Emmanuel, in the form of Jesus, whose ongoing revelation to God's people we celebrate in this season of Epiphany. In our days of calm and our days of conflict, may we always be aware of God's loving hands beneath us, God's loving arms around us, until, after our sometimes stormy passage, God's harbor is our home. Amen.