

“Living Water”

Isaiah 43:1-3a

September 26, 2021

Sometimes, I am invited to speak to seminary students who are discerning their call and preparing for ordained ministry. I always consider it a privilege whenever I receive such an invitation, an opportunity to share my own stories of the blessings and the challenges of this peculiar vocation, full of wonder and frustration. I try to be honest in giving my account of one pastor’s journey. I share the challenges. Those include an early bedtime every single Saturday night, speaking the truth in love to a diversely-minded body of believers who come to those diverse perspectives in honest and heartfelt ways and don’t part from them easily, and having total strangers demand from me an explanation for natural disasters or perhaps proof of God’s existence in the face of evil. The blessings, however, far outnumber any of those frustrations. Sharing real life and genuine faith with people at every stage of the journey is near the top of the list. For me, the opportunity every week to prepare and deliver sermons is a practice that nourishes my soul and feeds my mind. It never gets old. Studying scripture in community renews my faith. Serving alongside a gifted and committed team of staff who aim to use their gifts to change the world is an immeasurable blessing. And the opportunity I have to count among my closest friends the insightful children, talented teenagers, and faithful men and women from every generation now living is a humbling privilege.

But, if I am ever asked about *the* most joyful, the most meaningful, moment in pastoral ministry, I don’t have to think about it. The answer is easy. It is the sacrament of baptism. I have been blessed to celebrate hundreds of baptisms as a pastor over these nearly 14 years, and every single one is a sacred moment of transcendent beauty. Every single one

is written on my heart. Most were infants whom I held in my arms, cradling them with a promise of a community’s love and God’s eternal grace. But I have also been blessed by the opportunity to baptize children, teenagers, and adults as well. The experience of baptizing a 94-year-old man in his hospital room is one I can barely speak of. Speaking sacramental words, sharing this tangible sign of God’s grace, is often more than I can emotionally bear, and you’ve been witness to this. It is one of the most powerful moments in the life of any pastor or any faith community.

In last Sunday’s sermon, I suggested that spaces are sanctified—that is, spaces are made sacred—by the stories that are told within them, by the experiences that we share here. A baptism is one of those moments when the grand sweeping narratives of Christian faith meet the particular story of one beloved child of God, when the panoramic lens of God’s universal providence is traded for the zoom lens on the radical particularity of God’s love. Baptisms, of course, come in all shapes and sizes. Some traditions baptize by full immersion. Others dip. We sprinkle. The modes and means are as diverse as the communities that practice them, but the centrality of this sacred act is universal. It goes all the way back to Jesus himself, who was baptized in the Jordan River, who heard the word of God making a claim on his life. “*You are my Son, and I love you.*” This is what baptism means at its most basic and profound essence. You are God’s beloved child. God *claims* you.

For those of us in the Reformed theological tradition, it is not the act of baptism that makes this true. We believe, we confess, that all belong to God’s irresistible grace. Often when I’m meeting

with a couple before the baptism of their child, I say something like: “We will not be changing God’s mind about your child at their baptism. God is already crazy about your child and always will be.” No, baptism celebrates what is already true in a sacramental way. And that’s why we can joyfully baptize infants who cannot intellectually assent to the creed or even understand what is happening. For in that moment, we know nothing of the joys and challenges that lie ahead. We do know that there will be mountain top moments and deep valleys of sorrow. We do know that there will be the burdens of stress and frustration. We do know that there will be grief and sadness and pain and struggle. We do know that that beloved child of God will lose someone close to them and walk through a night of despair. We do know that the journey will have its ups and downs. And we also know this: no matter what, they belong to God. *No matter what*. God will walk with them. Baptism is a celebration of this transformative truth in the life of one of God’s children, the promise of which extends to all of God’s children.

In many ways, this morning’s poetic prophetic text from Isaiah functions similarly. Often, we think of the Old Testament prophets as thundering preachers of God’s judgment of systemic sin. And, often, that is precisely what they are. The prophets saw the world as it is, and they told the truth about it. They spoke of exploitation and injustice and demanded God’s people do something about it. They spoke of disregard for the basic needs of strangers, and they told God’s people, “That’s your job.” They spoke about hostility toward neighbors and the radical transformation made possible by neighbor love. But the difference between one of God’s prophets and a mere provocateur is that the prophet loves the people they chastise. Here in Isaiah 43 that dramatic turn comes in two three-letter words. *But now*.

“But now,” the prophet says, and the language changes. “But now,” the prophet says, and the tone softens. “But now,” the prophet says, and he speaks not of God’s judgement but of God’s tender, empowering love. “But now.” All of what has been is

no longer. “But now.” In their original context those two words served as motivation for a group of exiles preparing to return to Jerusalem, considering the possibility that they might resurrect the faith that they once shared there. You see, the danger was that captivity in Babylon was beginning to feel a little too much like home. Returning to the rubble of a temple that was destroyed and embracing the uncertainty of a life unknown was not an obvious or easy choice. And so Isaiah, to motivate the exiles, reaches all the way back to creation itself to reassure his people of God’s steadfast, immovable, unchanging love. *Listen*. The one who created you, the one who formed you, *will not* leave you now. Isaiah knows the journey ahead will not be easy. Every mountaintop moment will be matched by deep valley. And yet, that journey will be marked with the promise of God’s faithfulness.

When we mark a beloved child of God with the waters of baptism we do not—we cannot—promise that this sacrament will be a shield, protecting them from the pain and struggle that characterize every human life. We know there will be choppy waters, even raging fires. All we promise, all that matters, is that the God who created them will never forget them. The God who created and formed them will not abandon them to the raging river. We do promise that God will call them by name. We do promise that they belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to Jesus Christ.

You see, from the extraordinary breadth and sweep of God’s universal love the prophet zooms in, he adjusts the focus, and *calls us by name*. You, child, belong to God.

Slowly I am learning something about love. Slowly I’m learning that we cannot practice love in abstraction. There’s no such thing. The First Letter of John puts it plainly: “Let us love one another not with words and speech but in action and in truth.” You see, friends, Christian love is not a concept; Christian love is not a good idea. You cannot think your way into love. Love was born in this world in the person of Jesus Christ. Love took on flesh and

bone, and it wants to do so again and again and again. It is not a matter of understanding. It's not a matter of knowledge. As Fred Craddock used to say, "You can get an A+ in Bible and still fail Christianity." You know why? Because love is particular. I have called you by name. *You are mine.*

When you know you belong to God, everything can be different.

I think James Autry, the poet and son of a Mississippi Baptist preacher, captures it well in the poem simply titled, "Baptism."

*There is something about putting people under the
water and raising them up in the name of
the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
something that makes people cry
That makes them want everything to be alright.
That makes them want to leave this place
and be better,
to immerse themselves in their lives
And somehow be washed clean of all the things
they should not have done
and still should not want to do.
That's it.
Not the other things,
The star in the east,
The treasures in heaven
Or any of the old stories,
Not even life after death.
It's only to be new again.*

I wonder if you need to hear this today. You can be new. Not in abstraction, not in the ethereal sense. You can do life differently. You are not bound by the story of exile or the captivity of cultural criteria. You can release those constraints in the waters of baptism. You belong here. You belong here not because I say so but because God has made it so. Your value is not determined by your achievements—that treadmill you're on has no destination. These waters say who you are. You are not your past mistakes. You are not those missed opportunities. You are not your future potential, your resume, or your five-year plan. You are

not defined by status. You are not contained by the contrived, convenient categories of consumerism that claim to know you and advertise accordingly. You are not the number in your bank account, and you are not the pictures on your Instagram. Beloved, you have a name. Child of God.

Could this promise make us more courageous in our witness? Less anxious about the future? Could this promise give us the strength to stand united in our refusal to buy the narrative of destruction and division? Could this promise equip us for the work of ministry? What if we believed it? What if we believed it enough to take a risk? Here's what I think might happen. We would not let love be a warm feeling or a theoretical supposition. We would release the labels that divide and distract us. We would stop trying to decide who is worthy of our compassion and start loving like Jesus loves. We would take up practices of worship and prayer that deepen our walk in Christ so that we are strong for those valleys. We would stop making excuses for what we cannot do and move one step beyond caution into risky gospel faith. We would engage the work of ministry in tangible ways—offering invitations, listening to the stories of others, gathering to build up the body of Christ. We would turn our eyes to those we ignore, judge, secretly scold, or systemically silence. We would *stop* that and start all over.

Listen. These waters are not an abstract symbol of a vague promise that you are loved. We can get that message from many, many places. No, these waters go deeper. *Because* you are loved by the One who created and formed you, *you can be different.* I think that's why we cry at baptisms. Our souls know what our minds cannot comprehend, that when we touch those waters, we are touching the very heart of reality. Later, the prophet gives his people this promise: you shall be like a well-watered garden... You shall be called repairers of the breach.

That transformation begins in the promise of renewal. We can repair what is broken *because* we have been claimed, called, commissioned, equipped and sent. We must be repairers, giving everything we have to

the work of ministry because it is all that matters
in the final analysis. I want to say this as clearly as I
possibly can this morning. God's love can change you.
God is not finished with you, or us, or the world. You
can be new again. You can start right now. For God's
sake, don't settle for anything less. Amen.