

## Passing Through the Waters

Isaiah 43:1-7

Around this day over two thousand years ago, a momentous event occurred. A victorious Roman general had his army poised on the border between the frontier of Gaul and the borders of what we now know as Italy. If the general crossed the river, he would be committing treason, plunging his nation into a civil war. Yet if he didn't, he would be forced to surrender his army and face the ruin of his career. And so, finally, Julius Caesar led his army across the Rubicon, marking the beginning of the end of the Roman republic, and the series of events that would lead to the Roman Empire.

Crossing the Rubicon has become an idiom that means passing the point of no return. It means a dividing line, a crisis point, a step that changes someone or something forever. Passing through those waters changed the world.

For the people of Israel, passing through the waters marked instances of great change, as well. God told Noah that He would flood the entire earth until the highest mountain was twenty feet below the surface of the water. God destroyed all because of the wickedness of man, but He made a covenant of promise to save Noah and his family. After Moses and all the people of Israel passed through the waters of the parted Red Sea, God delivered His people as the walls of water slammed shut, crushing and drowning the entire Egyptian army, marking a dividing line between slavery and freedom. Under Joshua, God led Israel into the Promised Land when He parted the Jordan River, marking a dividing line between wandering in the wilderness and taking possession of the land promised to be theirs.

Passing through water marks a dividing line. That's why people were coming out to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptizer.

They were coming to pass through the water, to mark a change in their lives, repenting, renewing, reframing, and reshaping what their lives would be. The crowds went out from Jerusalem to hear from John, to hear his message to change their lives, to turn them around, to repent. Their lives would be marked by a difference between when they passed through the waters of repentance, before and after. John told them what that would look like. The tax collectors would stop cheating their clients, only collecting what they needed to. The soldiers would stop extorting those around them. Others would share their extra clothes and food with those who had none. Their lives would be very different after passing through those waters.

That's why Jesus launched His ministry in water at His Baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. His life would be different after passing through these waters. He would begin his public ministry, leaving Nazareth behind. The heavens would open, the Spirit would descend on him like a dove, and the Father's voice would declare, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." Just as Israel had crossed the Jordan long ago under the hand of their helper and savior, Joshua, to enter the Promised Land, so Jesus enters the Jordan to prepare the way for you, pass through the waters for you, and give you the promised land of heaven.

But passing through waters isn't always an easy thing. Many in Northwest Iowa are still recovering from the flood waters there this summer. People there, like others who have dealt with flooding, will mark their lives into the time before the flood and the time afterwards. Passing through the waters changed things, not necessarily for the better.

News reports continue to cover the fires in California. And while fingers get pointed and blame gets shifted based on climate change and forest mismanagement, the people who are passing through the fires are having their lives changed forever.

For the people of Israel hearing Isaiah's words, they'd passed through water and fire and wilderness. They're lives had been changed, and not for the better. But Isaiah doesn't come with a word of judgement, reminding them of what they had done, how they'd turned their backs on God and God's commands.

Instead, God reminds the people of Israel that they are His chosen people. They have been called by name, they have been chosen, and no fire or water, no floods or storms or exile, will ever change that fact. Reminding them that they had been led through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River, that he had been with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace, God promised to be with them even now, even when they were exiled, far from where God had been. Just as God had been with Abraham as he was led to the promised land, just as God had been with Moses as he passed through the waters of the Nile and the Red Sea and the fire of the burning bush, just as God had been with Isaiah while he was preaching an unpopular message of repentance, God be with the exiles and lead them back home.

But while that promise was directed to the people of Israel, God's chosen people, it wasn't enough to leave it at that. As we read later in Isaiah, "it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6). God's people were chosen and led through fire and water, not to be holy for themselves, but to share that light and life and calling with the whole world.

We, too, are called by name and led by God through water and fire. In Baptism, God called you by name, led you through water from death to new life, and gave you the fire of the Holy Spirit. While a splash of water, the flame of a candle, and a printed certificate may not look like much, it's in the little things that God works.

This is why Luther said, "The Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" (Small Catechism, Baptism, Fourth Part). Passing through the waters changes us, and changes our lives.

And because you have been called by name, because you have been chosen by God to be his beloved child, you have promises that God will never let you go. God promises that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

When coming back from visiting my brother in Indiana or family in Illinois, crossing the Mississippi River marks a halfway point, a sign that we're back in Iowa and getting closer to home. It marks a division between being away and being at home.

In baptism you have passed through the waters from death to life. God promises to be with you, and never leave you or forsake you, no matter what happens. It means you always have a home where you are loved. What a wonderful promise.

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