

Sermon Preached by the Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
January 9, 2022 Epiphany 1/The Baptism of Our Lord/Year C
Texts – Isaiah 43: 1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8: 14-17; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

Every Wednesday evening at 6:00 pm in Clemson SC, the students of the Canterbury Episcopal College Ministry gather at Holy Trinity Church for a home-cooked meal, program, and celebration of the Eucharist. For most of the ten years I was rector there, I had the joy and privilege of sharing supper and conversation with them and presiding at the Eucharist. After supper in the parish hall, we would walk through the breezeway and gather in the church, where several of them with guitars, sometimes a flute and a little percussion, would lead us in contemporary Christian songs that the group had collected over the years into their own songbook.

One of their favorites was based on the text from Isaiah this morning.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
And the waves will not overcome you.
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.
I have called you by name.
You are mine.

For I am the Lord your God (repeat)
I am the holy one of Israel, the savior. [I am the Lord/Do not fear]
(Repeat refrain)

I have to admit that a lot of the contemporary Christian music the students sang did nothing for me. Some of the lyrics sounded a little too much like sappy love songs from smitten teenaged girls to their boyfriend, Jesus. But this one, based on today's scripture text, truly moved me when I joined them in singing it. The flood waters of their final exams and term papers and research projects, the fires of relationships gone sour and friendship dramas all combined in their young struggles to find themselves, to discover who they truly were. The song assured them that God was their anchor holding them fast in the storm. "Do not fear," they sang out. "I have redeemed you. Do not fear." They were hearing God calling them back to Him, to who He created them to be. And above all else, they were hearing that they were loved, a message they needed to hear as they passed through the waters and walked through the fires of their young lives.

It's a message whose truth never fades, although over the years the school of hard knocks sometimes hardens us older folks and blocks our hearing. Sometimes we keep the promise of solace that God offers at a distance, not daring to hope in the eternal truth the words convey: I am the Lord your God. I am the holy one of Israel, the Savior. Do not fear. Do not fear.

The images of water and fire stand out in the passage. Water and fire – they are among the most fearsome elements on the planet. They have the power to destroy, and the power to sustain life. In the rush of a storm surge, water can overwhelm in an instant and drown everyone in its path. Yet water also is the source of all of life. We emerged out of water. Our bodies are primarily made up of water. We must have water to survive. Water cleanses. Water refreshes. Water gives life. Moses

led the people of Israel through the waters on the first leg of their journey toward the Promised Land, even as their Egyptian pursuers were drowned in the very same waters.

And fire also has that dual edge. As we have seen multiple times over the past few years, especially out west, fire can sweep through a valley and incinerate forests, buildings, and entire communities in a matter of hours. Yet fire also cooks our food, gives light in the darkness, and heats our homes. What can be more comforting than a quiet evening spent sitting by the warmth of the fire gently burning in the woodstove? Yet the same fire of a blazing star that led wise men to Jesus also fed Herod's fear and led him to massacre the innocent.

Four years ago, not long ago in the grand scheme of things, the chaos waters of discord were rising here, the fires of conflict were beginning to rage. Feelings were hurt. Pain touched a number of people. Anger and confusion mounted. Some felt caught in a tsunami or singed by racing fire. A few had to retreat in order to heal and protect themselves.

But you have passed through the waters. You have walked through the fire. And look around – the waters did not overwhelm you. The fire did not consume you. Even in the midst of a life-changing pandemic, the Lord your God has been with you. The promise has been kept. The Holy One of Israel, the God of our ancestors, the God incarnate in Christ, has redeemed you. Do not fear. Do not fear.

Each year on this First Sunday after Epiphany we celebrate the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. Today we hear the story of Jesus' baptism from Luke, who reminds us that water and fire are part and parcel to the life of the baptized. That means two things. First, our faith does not promise that our life will be free from danger, free from stress, free from heartache, free from confusion. Jesus experienced all of that and more. You have experienced all that and more. And for the faithful, like for Jesus, water and fire carve a path to the cross.

But with the prophets and Paul we know "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Our story does not end at the cross. Our faith promises us that we need not be overwhelmed or consumed. Water and fire, the elements that hold the power to do us in, are the same elements that have become the vehicle for our salvation. "I baptize with water," John says. "But one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." The water of baptism cleanses us and gives us new life. The fire of the Holy Spirit forges in us a strength like tempered steel to withstand all the world can throw at us with courage and perseverance.

So do not fear. Do not be afraid to seek forgiveness from someone you've hurt or wronged. Do not be afraid to forgive someone who has hurt you. Do not be afraid to be reconciled.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid of another's very different perspective on things. Do not be afraid to reach out her. Do not be afraid to listen deeply to his experience. Do not be afraid to be changed.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid to let go of pride. Do not be afraid to be humble. Do not be afraid to let love surprise you.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid to proclaim the Gospel boldly, even using words if necessary.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid to confront evil, to work for justice, to speak the truth, for all truth is of God, and God leads us to love.

Do not fear. Do not be afraid to step into the stream of God's grace and let it carry you to abundant life.

"For I am the Lord your God," proclaims Isaiah, "The Holy One of Israel, your savior. Do not fear. I am with you. I am with you. I am with you.