

Through the Waters: First Presbyterian Church-Concord, NC, January 13, 2019

I have a love/hate relationship with water. There is nothing better than a cold drink of water when you're thirsty after a long walk or run. But when your healthcare provider tells you that you should be drinking 80-90 oz a day it's not so tasty anymore.

A refreshing dip in the swimming pool on a hot July day...lovely. But a cold shower in the morning because someone in your family took an extra long shower...miserable. A nice hot bath with eucalyptus salts at the end of a stressful day to help you unwind is simply divine. But burning your tongue on your hot tea after that bath-not so much!

How about rain? I love it when I'm at home and can spend the day napping in front of the fire, in my jammies. But rain when you've got to sit through a day of soccer games or bring in bags and bags of groceries and it's also 38 degrees outside (like today?)...I hate rain.

You see what I mean?

I like to take long walks along the edge of the ocean, but I do not want to go in there to swim. I know how to swim, but for as long as I can remember I have had the same recurring nightmare about a tidal wave. And in my nightmare, I'm in a high rise building, on a balcony at the beach, and I'm above the ground floor, but I don't know what floor I'm on and the water is coming and I just don't know if I'm up high enough. And if I am, will the building collapse when the wave hits? The water.... It's just so big, so unknown, so powerful, so terrifying.

Then there are the waters of baptism, be it a sprinkle or immersion, for a child or an adult, there's little sense of terror with these waters. I grew up in another Christian tradition and my baptism was by immersion (or dunking) at the age of 13. I wasn't scared-but I remember being mesmerized by the view of the sanctuary from the front of the pool, a felt a bit angelic in the white robe I was wearing over my clothes, and I was curious about the waders my pastor had on in the baptismal pool. I had never seen waders before. The waters of baptism bring with them a sense of wonder, curiosity, joy, of inclusion and celebration. These waters give us a visible sign of God's invisible grace and love for us. And we emerge through these waters changed, a new creation, cleansed and forever marked as one of God's very own.

Water is a crucial element to our well being. We cannot live without it.

In our text from Isaiah this morning from chapter 43, verse 2 reads...² *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;*

The prophet Isaiah is writing to people who knew a little something about water and its power. You see, he is writing to God's people "who have seen Jerusalem decimated and they have been deported into exile." (from Harper Collins Bible Commentary by James Mays)

In the book of Isaiah-the prophet has spent the first 39 chapters of his sermon reminding these folks that they had a role in getting themselves into this mess and that they had better learn some righteousness. But by chapter 40 of Isaiah The prophet Isaiah is now ready to bring them a word of comfort from the Lord. (aren't y'all glad my sermon is only one chapter?)

I told you that these folks knew about powerful waters. They heard the story from their ancestors about Noah. And the wickedness of the people. And the Ark. And the flood...the 40 day flood. You remember that story right? If you don't know that story-pull out the pew Bible and check out Genesis chapters 6-9. There are two versions of Noah's story in there for you. These people knew that story. They knew what water can do.

They also knew about the Exodus. And the Red Sea. Remember that story? No worries if you don't...The book of Exodus is right there in the Bible. It comes right after Genesis-it's the second book and this story is in Exodus chapters 1-14-especially 14. I'm going to hit the highlights for you.

These were the very descendants of Moses who went to Pharaoh and pleaded for him to let his enslaved people go free. Remember this story? Pharaoh finally said yes after the 10 plagues swayed him a little bit... and as the Moses' people, the Israelites, were leaving Egypt, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his Egyptian soldiers after them. Moses and the Israelites walked through the parted sea to safety, but the Egyptian Soldiers...Listen to Exodus chapter 14:

As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea.²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

Isaiah is speaking to these very descendants of Moses and Israel-they knew about the terror of water and just what God could do with it. They knew about Noah, and the Exodus. They had a right to be terrified.

Now here is the Prophet Isaiah in chapter 43 revealing one of God's promises to them and to us. Isaiah shares with us saying...THE LORD! This very LORD, the one of the flood and of the exodus-this same LORD who created you now says to them and to us-Do not be afraid. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine. You are precious in my sight.

When you pass through the waters...WHEN you pass through the waters, not if. You will pass through some waters my children. Some will be pleasant waters, some will be rough.

You will pass through waters in this life. You will get wet. You may feel a bone chilling dampness for a long time from that water. Your fingers and toes may be shriveled for a long time. The water will leave you changed. But when you pass through the waters, THE LORD GOD says, I will be with you. You will not be wet, damp, cold, wrinkled, shriveled AND alone. I'll be there, in the water with you.

And then God makes another promise-not only will you not be alone, THE LORD GOD says you will not be overwhelmed by the water. When you go through the waters, the waters will not overflow you, you will not be overwhelmed, and you will not go down like the Egyptians in those chariots. Do not fear. The waters, no matter how powerful and rough, will not engulf you. You will not be conquered.

The divorce, the job, the prodigal child, the death, the diagnosis, the treatment, the addiction, the failure, the mistake, the betrayal, the estrangement, the mental illness, the move, the anxiety, the failure, the abandonment...these are rough waters.

THE LORD GOD says do not be afraid. No matter what happens in these waters, I am with you. You are precious in my sight, you are mine, I have redeemed you, I love you. You are mine. I am with you. You may feel overwhelmed by the waters of life, things may not end the way you wish. But you will never be alone and you will never be conquered. I have conquered all things, for you. Friends, this is the good news of the gospel.

God's church, the Church of Jesus Christ, all of its denominations including the Presbyterian church, are also going through some rough waters. The church of the future will likely not resemble the church of the past-despite the gift it has been to so many of us. Despite all the wonderful things about this place, your congregation-First Concord- I suspect you are likely doing some white water rafting in some areas. We as the Presbyterian church are good and wet.

But I hope as we travel together down this rough river into the future church of Jesus Christ, we will travel through these waters and allow them to be more like the waters of baptism rather than those of my tidal wave nightmare. A tidal wave rushes in, turns things upside down, wreaks havoc, and then recedes away into nothingness, often leaving destruction behind.

My prayer is that we the church of Jesus Christ allow our ride through these waters to be more like the waters of baptism-that we will allow these rough waters to transform the church of Jesus Christ into a new creation. I pray that the church emerges **from** the sanctuary and flows into the community and the future church **becomes** a place of sanctuary out in the world... for those who will never come in but need the hope, grace and love that the church has to offer.

My prayer is that our church becomes like the waters of baptism-a visible sign of God's invisible grace and love-out there in the world. We have it and feel it in here-but do they feel it out there?

I don't know what exactly that will look like. I imagine it will look a little different in each community and congregation. I hope you will remember that God is with y'all while you pass through these waters and that you, First Concord, will listen to how the Holy Spirit is calling and transforming you to be the church of the future.

I'll close with a short paragraph from New York Times best selling author Kate Bowler's book titled "Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved". Life's trials and rough waters are often chalked up to "Everything Happens for a Reason". Kate is a professor at Duke Divinity School specializing the prosperity gospel. She seemed to have it all—a good job, a happy marriage to her high school sweetheart, and a newborn son. And then at the age of 35 she was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer. Listen to her words from her chapter titled 'Certainty'...

(read pg 121-122)

In those first few days after my diagnosis, when I was in the hospital, I couldn't see my son, I couldn't get out of bed, and I couldn't say for certain that I would survive the year. But I felt as though I'd uncovered something like a secret about faith. Even inlucid moments, I found my feelings so difficult to explain. I kept saying the same thing: "I don't want to go back. I don't want to go back."

At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.

When they sat beside me, my hand in their hands, my own suffering began to feel like it had revealed to me the suffering of others, a world of those who, like me, are stumbling in the debris of dreams they thought they were entitled to and plans they didn't realize they had made.

That feeling stayed with me for months. In fact I had grown so accustomed to that floating feeling that I started to panic at the prospect of losing it. So I began to ask friends, theologians, pastors I knew, and nuns I liked, 'What am I going to do when it's gone?' And they knew exactly what I meant because they had either felt it themselves or read about it in great works of Christian theology. St Augustine called it 'the sweetness'. Thomas Aquinas called it something mystical like 'the prophetic light'. But all said, yes, it will go. The feelings will go. The sense of God's presence will go. There will be no lasting proof that God exists. There will be no formula for how to get it back.

But they offered me this small bit of certainty, and I clung to it. When the feelings recede like the tides, they said, they will leave an imprint. I would somehow be marked by the presence of an unbidden God.

Amen