

When

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Isaiah 43:1-2

“Do not fear.” Take a moment to soak in those words. How much are we fearing at this moment in our lives? And yet, God reassures us, here in Isaiah, like a loving parent, “Don’t be afraid.” “We are in this together.” The reason God gives not to fear? “For I have redeemed you.”

When I hear the word redeemed, aside from theology, my first thought is coupons! Do you enjoy clipping coupons? When we redeem a coupon, we trade in a piece of paper and, in exchange, receive something – a discount, a prize.... The piece of paper would be meaningless, except that it has some sort of promise written on it.

The Hebrew concept of redemption also contains the idea of exchange, but it’s much more connected to the idea of *rescue*. Buying back or reclaiming something – or someone – who has been taken or lost, as when someone buys back a relative out of slavery or reclaims land that had been sold to pay debts.

So here, when God says to the people, “I have redeemed you,” it means that God has rescued them from exile. God has reclaimed them.

If we hear them in a personal sense, these words of God’s, “I have redeemed you,” we can think of the things that have bound us, that have kept us in their grasp, and see that God reclaims us from them, calls out our name, and sets us free again.

I had a friend in college who was one of those people who always had an umbrella, somehow, when it rained. You know people like that? His being so prepared was a little annoying, but also, you were glad to have the umbrella! His motto was, “Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.”

I’m not sure where my friend picked it up – I always thought it was the Boy Scouts – but Maya Angelou wrote something like it in 1969, in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Her mother, Vivian, lives by this mantra that allows her to receive anything her daughter brings to her with calm and acceptance: “Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between.”

When we are planning for contingencies – or helping our children plan ahead – we may say something like, “If there’s a fire, we will meet in front of the next door neighbor’s house” or “If you get a flat tire, pull over and call Triple A.” “If our plane is delayed...” “If you forget your keys...” “If, if, if...”

This is what strikes me about the passage from Isaiah! As God speaks to the people about passing through the waters of life’s challenges and walking through the fire, God doesn’t say “if,” but “when,” when you pass through the waters, because it is *a sure thing that hard days will come*. And with the *sure thing* of hard days, we need the *sure thing* of God’s presence to bring us through. The certainty of challenge needs the certainty of help:

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and [when you pass] through the

rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

The water is surely a reference to the Exodus event, when God led the people out of slavery; and yet, as soon as they were free from one thing, they faced another – a body of water too big to cross, with the Egyptian army coming right up behind them. They were escaping from harm, with danger on every side, but freedom at the end. *When you pass through the waters. When you walk through fire.*

You, here, in this room, are people who have passed through waters in so many ways: cancer, illness, loss, exile from home, rejection, obstacles beyond counting. And yet here you are!, leaving me in awe with your persistence.

And what about fire, the trials and tribulations that might leave us scorched, burnt out or embittered or disabused? And yet you *have not let them consume you.*

When pastors read a text, we often ask ourselves, “Where is the gospel/the good news in this passage?” In this passage, my answer is that the good news is in the words that don’t seem to count as much – the connectors – the prepositions – *with* and *through* – simple words that feel like extras, but, in this case, hold deepest promise.

In those trying times, the promise is that God is *with*. Not that it goes away, not that it is easy, for this would ring false to our living ears, but that we are never, never alone. And I would venture to say, even, that there are moments when we can feel that *with-ness* palpably, that we are keenly aware of some grace sustaining us which we know is greater than the sum of our parts.

With. This is the God I know! God-Who-Stays-With-You. Stays, no matter what.

And *through*, the good news is in the word, “through”; for “passing *through* the waters” and “*through* the fire,” means coming out on the other side.

Many of you know something about our family story. Our oldest son, who is in his late 20’s now, came into our lives from foster care when he was 10 years old, and the mountains he had to climb in order to accept our love were giants.

There were three years in which we lived through trauma and violence and grief bordering on despair. He made it through, though, – we made it through together.

During those three years, the book of Isaiah, and especially this passage, became meaningful to me in a way it never had before. I remember preaching on this text smack in the middle of the hardest time, and feeling it do its work of hope in me.

As I thought this week, again, about passing through the waters, about the other side of the Red Sea, I remembered these years in our lives and a particular moment of feeling that we’d made it through. It’s a moment I’d written about after the dust settled, and so I’ll ready to you what I wrote all those years ago:

It was early on a weekend evening a few months after [our son] moved back home [from the residential facility], and we were sitting on the back patio in the thrilling yellow light of spring becoming summer.

Our dinner, eaten outside in our porch chairs, holding our plates on our laps every day the Ohio weather allowed it, had just concluded, and [he] had gotten out his bike. He was riding laps around the house, emanating happiness, and we sat back, relaxed, watching him.

Suddenly, the peace was so loud that the two of us looked at one another in astonishment. We were being a family; he was being a kid. For the first time, after wading along the shores of hell for so many months, taking regular swims, we took deep breaths, and smiled, understanding that we were somewhere new now.

We could accept pleasure in sitting together after dinner, watching our child play. “So this is what other parents feel like,” I thought.

Wherever you are in our scripture this morning, if you are at the cusp of something daunting and feeling fear, or in the midst of rushing waters or heat, or maybe you are looking back, feet on solid ground – my prayer for you is that you can feel the presence of the God whom I’ve come to lean upon, and that you will be held, in every circumstance, by God-Who-Stays-With-You.

Amen.