

Sermon, Baptism of Jesus, St. David's, 1/9/2022, Isaiah 43:1-7 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord, when I get excited because we get to hear about beloved John the Baptist and have an opportunity to sing two of my favorite hymns, "On Jordan's Bank" and "Wade in the Water." I'm especially glad that Bonnie chose those two hymns today, because I am not, in fact, going to preach on John the Baptist, or on the Gospel at all. Instead, today I felt led toward the passage from Isaiah. The passage which opens "But now," although the "but now" was not included in our bulletin snippet.

But now... "but now" is a pivot. A pivot from how it was to now. "Pivot" is a word I am sick of because I've heard it too much the past two years, and I suspect you all have as well. The pandemic has meant that we have had to learn to pivot. Here in the church, that has meant being prevented from worshipping in person and having to learn to worship online, and then to worship together with precautions, and to try to impossibly balance different risk tolerances. The precautions we've taken when worshipping in person wax and wane. Do we cut a reading or creed or hymn or all three? We had just scraped graying tape off the floor and gone back to lay eucharistic ministers and our real bread for two Sundays, but then here we are today with factory-sealed sacrament. Here we are with masks required and windows open in winter and omicron everywhere. Pivot, pivot, pivot.

Isaiah was writing about God's people being exiled to Babylon. In the chapter preceding this one, before the but now, the prophet wrote

But this is a people robbed and plundered,
 all of them are trapped in holes
 and hidden in prisons;
 they have become a prey with no one to rescue,
 a spoil with no one to say, "Restore!"¹

That changes with his pivot: with "But now": "But now thus says the Lord, he who created you o Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine."

Do not fear. We hear that all the time in Scripture. Do not fear.

I have some trepidation about holding up "do not fear" today, because I am certain some of you will hear this as me saying do not fear the disease that has been plaguing our world for two years. And that is not what I believe. What has happened in our world the past two years is scary, and the disease is not the only scary thing. Our divisions have only grown scarier. Our reactions to each other are scary. Our mental health from not being able to interact in the ways that we used to are scary.

What has happened to the church as a result of the pandemic is scary. I haven't seen many of you in person for two years. The last time we had a baptism here in church was two years ago, on the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. We baptized two adults. We were getting ready to consecrate

¹ Isaiah 42:22

a new bishop. On the personal front, I had just learned that I had breast cancer, and that was scary but things looked bright for the church, aside from me and all I did not know at that time about what was ahead for me.

And then: the pandemic. Closures. More, and more serious, cancer for me. Deaths. Disability. Re-openings and re-closings.

So much to scare us. But to me, especially, that we have not had a baptism here for two years. We did not have a single baptism in 2021. That terrifies me. What is happening to our church without these transcendent celebrations of new life?

So when I hear Isaiah say that the Lord is telling me “do not fear,” honestly, I get a little mad. And when I get messages on the same day accusing me of being afraid of the bishop on one hand and not being afraid enough of COVID-19 on the other hand, I get a little mad.

I find it challenging to hear “do not fear,” even though I want more than anything to cling to these beautiful words: to “I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you, and 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.”

One of my dearest preaching mentors, David Schlafer, wrote an article in the commentary I consulted about this passage, and his words brought me some comfort, because he pointed out that Isaiah does not tell us there’s nothing to be afraid of. I have named legitimate fears. We all have different fears and different risk tolerances, but I am not crazy for being afraid for my health and for your health and for the health of our church.

David further writes, “Perhaps the most fruitful underlying strategy for addressing various dimensions of fear is the act of naming—naming the fears themselves...and naming those who are undergoing them.”²

Naming is so appropriate on a Sunday when we celebrate baptism, a time when traditionally babies were named. It’s not part of our current prayer book service, but earlier, the priest would say to the parents of an infant about to be baptized, “Name this child.”

Name this child. Name this fear. When we name our fears, we are better able to pray to God about them. We are better able to hear the words Do not fear. I have called you by name: you are mine. The waters shall not overwhelm you.

In these turbulent times, what are fears you can name to God, and who are the people in those fears you can name in prayer?

² Schlafer, David, Commentary 2: Isaiah 43:1-7, in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018, Year C Vol. 1, p. 164.