

“The Rivers Will Not Overwhelm You”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Isaiah 43:1-3a
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
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This passage from Isaiah has long been one of my favorite Scriptures. If I were to tattoo any part of the Bible on my body—I’m not going to—but if I did, it might be this:

*Thus says the Lord,
She 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.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you,
And through the rivers,
They will not overwhelm you,
When you walk through the fire
You shall not be burned,
And the flames shall not consume you.”*

It’s hard to explain how and why it has meant so much to me through the decades, especially since faith itself has changed so much for me which means so has the meaning of this text. How do I fit twenty years of loving this passage into one twenty minute sermon?

I think what first captured me about these verses was the sheer power of the poetry and the promise. There was this deep comfort in hearing that the God who made me would always be with me, no matter what trials life brought.

But there’s more. The rest of Isaiah 43 reminds us that water imagery is prominent throughout the Israelite story. God delivered God’s people through the Red Sea. God provided water in the wilderness. In vv. 16-17 you can hear Isaiah remembering the Exodus, “Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters . . .” and in vv. 18-20 Isaiah looks ahead to what God will do, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” but Isaiah imagines the future by remembering God’s deliverance in the past taking care of the needs of the people in their wilderness wanderings, “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert . . . for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people.” So much mention of water!

And then on a today like today, when we are observing the baptism of Christ, water reminds us also of baptism. These days baptisms are relatively mild. There is often an indoor baptistery with preheated water, like what we have here. At Lake Shore, the most daring bit about it is that

sometimes Gordon has to fish bugs out of the water early on a Sunday morning before the rest of you arrive for a baptism. But that's about as exciting as it gets. I think perhaps we miss something when our baptisms are so tame.

In the old days, they baptized in rivers—cold, rushing, unpredictable rivers. There were bugs in that water for sure, and fish and snakes and who knows what else. There was definitely no such thing as sprinkling. You were immersed. Oh, and also, you were naked.

That's right. The early church baptized people in the nude. I don't think John the Baptist baptized in the nude—that tradition came later, but eventually part of the ritual of baptism was stripping down to your birthday suit and saying, "Lord, here I am."

So I would say there are some parts of the tradition I am relieved we don't practice anymore. But the river part still intrigues me. I mean, as a person who does the baptizing, don't get me wrong. I prefer warm safe water if my own self is getting in there. But theoretically, as an idea, I like the river. The river reminds me that this entrance into the Christian life isn't exactly tranquil. It is a gift of grace, yes, but also it is a calling, and callings don't always take you into easy places where you want to go.

Faith is more river rapids than lazy river, more ocean wave than kiddie pool. It's not just that God will be with you when life is inevitably hard. It's also sort of like God is calling you into the turbulent waters, but promises to be there every step of the way. Things might be easier if you stayed put, but that's not the way calling works. Calling beckons you out into the unknown murky waters.

When Israelites left slavery in Egypt, they had to cross the Red Sea and the wilderness. The calling took them through tough stuff. And do you remember how much they complained about it? "*Woe is me. If only we had stayed in Egypt!*"

Spiritual growth is like that. You'll be tempted to go back, to return to the familiarity and predictability of your own oppression. Or to put in another way, spiritual growth is a little like being born. Before you pass through the birth canal, you're safe and warm and there's nothing much to trouble you. But once you come out the other side there is a whole world to deal with! Better to have just stayed inside, right?! But not really. Most of us want to actually live outside the womb, experience the world even if we are vulnerable to its disappointments and hardships.

It is fascinating, isn't it, that even Jesus got baptized? I used to hear his baptism explained away: Jesus did it just as an example to us because Jesus didn't really like, need baptism, you know? He was already the Son of God. He didn't have to get dunked in water to prove it.

But I think maybe he did need it? He was human too, right? He came out of that river and headed straight for the wilderness, just like the Israelites—only he was luckier than them and only had to wander around forty days instead of forty years. The way the story is told, it's like the baptism sets him up for the wilderness. It's his birth canal into the real world of being the Messiah. Before that, it maybe wasn't so tough being the Son of God in a human body. But at the edge of

the Jordan Jesus accepted his calling and waded right in to whatever God had in store. Even Jesus needed the cold river slap of courage to wake him up and set him on his way.

I like thinking that even Jesus needed rituals and markers along the way to sustain him. I like thinking of Jesus with river mud squishing between his toes as he approached the water. I like thinking of his sharp intake of breath as the cold water reached his thighs, his stomach. I like wondering if Jesus had to plug his nose before he went under, and whether, when he came up from the water, did he use his hands to push back his wet hair and get the water from his eyes?

Usually when we talk about Jesus' baptism, we talk about the supernatural parts. The voice from heaven. The Spirit descending like a dove. But today I'm talking about the messy, wild, river parts, because that is more like what we experience when we attempt to follow Jesus. Like, maybe, every once in awhile, one or two of us hear a voice from heaven, maybe. But mostly we find ourselves sitting on the banks, getting mud out from between our toes and wondering what on earth we just signed up for and thinking about how our sandals are going to squish-squash all the way home because we forgot to bring a towel to dry off our feet and worrying whether our hair will air dry in a way that doesn't look ridiculous.

I mean, did Jesus think to bring an extra set of dry clothes? Or did his clothes hang heavy, dripping all the way into the wilderness? Did the desert sand stick to his sandals because his feet were still wet, and isn't that the worst feeling? Sand in your shoes? Forget tempting Jesus with all the kingdoms of the world or whatever; if I were the devil, I would have tempted him with a pair of dry shoes and a magical sand-sucking vacuum.

My point is, so often we point to Jesus' baptism as the sign that he was special, marked by God, divine. And all that is true. But also Jesus' baptism marks him as human. It initiates him into the vulnerabilities of wandering the wilderness of faith. When entering the waters of baptism, Jesus is so like us, exposed to the turbulence of life and the challenges of faith. Sure, there is this voice from heaven at his baptism that says, "This is my son, the beloved, in him I am well pleased," which is pretty cool. But the voice reminds me of those lines from the prophet Isaiah, spoken to the people of Israel: "Thus says the Lord, she who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel, 'I have called you by name, you are mine.'" Jesus wasn't the first person God named as beloved. Jesus wasn't even the first person John baptized! He was one among many. The Gospel of Luke says, "Now when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also had been baptized . . ."

Isn't that interesting? Jesus didn't start the practice of baptism. He joined in what the people of God were already doing and determined he needed a good dunk in the river too. We so often talk of following Jesus, and I like that language. But there's also this sense in the biblical narrative that Jesus joined a story that was already unfolding to walk alongside us—not so much walking out ahead of us but side by side with us, walking where we walk, living as we live. It gives a whole new meaning to the words, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." Literally, concretely, God will be with you as demonstrated in the person of Christ who walked where you walked and waded where you waded.

I'm not so sure Jesus got baptized as an example for us to follow but as a sign that he was entering the waters with us, ready to take the plunge, self-determined not to leave us to face things alone.

This path we are on to be lovers of God and lovers of God's good earth is a difficult one, full of trials and temptations. If the journey of faith has been easy for you, you're probably doing it wrong! I think it's a safe bet to say most of you or all of you have struggled; maybe you are struggling now. Maybe your current problems are the pesky mundane ones that build and build until you crash; maybe you've got one great big crisis like a tsunami wave towering over you. Whatever your struggle, no matter the size, be it past, present, or future, hear now these words from the prophet Isaiah:

*Thus says the Lord,
She 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.
When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you,
And through the rivers,
They will not overwhelm you,
When you walk through the fire
You shall not be burned,
And the flames shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior."*

Amen.