



Passing through the Waters

Isaiah 43:1-7

Luke 3:15-17 and 21-22

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 shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel.

At first reading, these words seem cruel in the context of today. What dissonance with the devastation in days past! In the midst of the Haitian earthquake crisis, how can we speak these words, without asking these questions:

- Does God choose to protect some and not others?
- Was God lying?
- Is God weak, unable to intervene when the world's poorest get trampled on?

Or, most cruel perhaps, the hypothesis Pat Robertson put out—that Haiti is being punished for a pact the slaves made with the devil on the eve of their revolt against their French occupiers. To him I say,

- Sounds like a myth made by the ousted European colonizers to further demonize their former slaves. (Although, if I were enslaved by people who taught me their religion justified my bondage, I might turn to other sources as well for spiritual strength.)
- Pat Robertson needs to count; if he wants to take that route, according to the myth, this alleged pact was made in 1791, and was to last for 200 years. It expired 19 years ago, so Haiti doesn't belong to the devil anymore!
- Pact or no pact, God does not intentionally cause this level of human suffering. Haiti suffers from a legacy of human and global oppression, and we need to take responsibility for it rather than perpetuate myths that further ostracize a suffering people.

But I am preaching to the choir on this one.

However, after reflecting on this Isaiah verse many times, it occurred to me: these are promises uttered to a people who have passed through waters, and drowned. They have been through rivers, and overwhelmed. They have walked through fire and have been burned, consumed. This is a word preached to a people who have seen their beloved homeland destroyed by the Babylonians. The Temple, the center of worship and identity for the Israelites, destroyed. The ark, which bore the covenant God made with God's people, purportedly taken by Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. The people were exiled, forced to live in the land of their oppressors. Their lives as they knew it had crumbled. It was as if they had lost everything.

And they had—except for their God, who calls them by name. And by resting their identity in a God who does not forget their name, even when all else is lost, they may begin to rebuild, piece by piece, their lives. You see, God's word promises restoration—not exemption—from life's suffering.

48 hours ago, my partner Chris considered the possibility of going to Haiti to report on peoples' uprooted lives there. In 8 hours, she will be there.

- It's important
- It's the kind of work Chris lives for
- It makes me completely worried

I had already been tracking the tragic events through newspapers and news websites, praying for the people I read about and pondering what ways our country and our church can respond. Since Chris' trip materialized, I have been doing the same, and also praying for her safety and imagining all the things that could go wrong. In my reading, I found the most moving testimony in the blog¹ of two missionaries from Global Ministries, which is the global mission arm of the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. Missionaries Kim and Patrick Bentrutt are from Kansas City, but have been living in Port-au-Prince since 2008. Kim is a physician, and she is working through the church to train nurses in labor and delivery practices. Patrick teaches in an orphanage, and through that work they welcomed the baby Solomon into their lives, whom they are in the process of adopting.

Miraculously, Kim, Patrick and Solomon survived the earthquake without injury. Their three story apartment building collapsed into two stories. When the shaking started, they ran down from their third floor apartment to their neighbor's apartment on the second floor. They found that they were walking from their neighbor's second story balcony right onto the street. They thought their house had exploded on its own, until they saw neighbors from other buildings stumbling onto the street, bodies whitened with dust, faces they had recognized but had never exchanged conversation with, hugging them in relief and thanksgiving for each others' lives. Throughout the streets

¹ kimandpatrick.blogspot.com

people were alternatively wailing in loud lamentation, and singing hymns of thanks and praise to God.

Back at the school where Kim had taught nursing students only hours before the earthquake hit, she found six stories of collapsed rubble. I read Kim's words straight from their blog: "Families left pictures of their loved ones on the mountains of rock as prayers for their departed souls. It was then that I cried, seeing the faces of my students, the picture of my top student, the one who had aced all my tests, volunteered the most in my clinics... looking up at me from a still shot on that pile."

At night, Kim and Patrick and their neighbors moved mattresses into the street, fearing that buildings would crumble more with the aftershocks.

"The sky was full of stars that night. We could see Orion, Andromeda, Scorpio, the dippers, Mars. I've never seen a sky like that in Port-au-Prince. Hymns rose up all around us from groups gathered: How Great Thou Art. When the music subsided, the wailing resumed; then the music rose up again, as if to add comfort for those enduring such pain, such loss. Everyone in the camp was taking care of each other, sharing water, divvying up snacks, taking turns sleeping or sitting on mattresses, offering a back rub or support.

"Sleeping on the ground, you felt every shake, and looked up to see if anything was going to fall. Solomon entertained the huddled people with his youthful oblivion to what was going on. He was a blessing, others told me, keeping their minds on something happy and hopeful. He allowed people to laugh."

The name of Kim's and Patrick's blog says, "Adventures in Life: The Life and Times of two Americans in Haiti: the celebrated, the inspired, the frustrated, and all that lies between." The picture at the start of the blog shows a Haitian landscape: two beautiful, curved stone mountains with a low center between them.

That picture is the landscape of life. It has its gorgeous peaks, and then its gaping chasms. And it is not just; it is troubling, that some chasms are mere valleys, while others are bottomless canyons.

So what can we as Christians say in the face of such deep human suffering? As a pastor, I am not going to offer an explanation of why horrible things happen to innocent people-- besides my belief that the earth is unruly and messy and beyond human control and sometimes, simply unjust. As a pastor, I am not even going to offer much hope this morning. I think there must be some time where we attempt to find some solidarity with the mourning and pain people in Haiti are feeling right now, before we move on to hope. What I am going to offer is a conviction: that these words from God in Isaiah are for all of us: You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.

My conviction is that this promise is not for a chosen few, but for all of God's children. It is the promise that God calls us by name. It was the promise that the Holy Spirit bestowed upon Jesus in the river Jordan at his baptism, and it is the promise that was given to Micah this morning. It is the promise that rings true for each person in this room. And it is the promise guaranteed for all lives—lost, injured, or surviving—in Haiti right now. Because I have this conviction that each one of them is precious, honored and loved by God, then I know that my welfare is bound up in their welfare.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. prophesied to the precious, beloved nature of all God's children. He taught us in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail that "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly... injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."² That conviction led King and those who boldly marched with him to endure the high pressure jets of fire hoses, as they fought for equality between the races. Some, including King, were hospitalized by the power of those fire hoses. But just as that water hospitalized, it also baptized us into new understandings, into transformation and liberation.

We see water throughout the bibles' history as a means of both destruction and transformation and liberation.

We remember Hagar, concubine to Abraham, mother of his firstborn but forgotten son, wailing not because she is dying of thirst—though she is—but because her son Ishmael is dying of thirst. And yet, in the midst of their suffering, God provided a well of water, from which the boy drank and was saved. (Gen. 21)

We remember Noah's Ark. How weird it is that this was a beloved children's story! So many animals and humans destroyed-- and yet God preserved the piece of creation in the ark. The waters cleansed the earth, and creation was given the chance to start anew.

We remember the crossing of the Red Sea— yes, Moses and Miriam led the Hebrews across the waters to liberation from slavery. Yet think of the slavery, the beatings, the oppression the Hebrews endured before getting to that point.

Once they were out of slavery, they were wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, just stuck there! They worried about food, and God provided manna and quail-- but only enough for each day. If they took too much, it would turn to worms and rot! And when they were thirsty, God commanded Moses to strike the rock-- and water burst forth!

We will pass through water many more times. All God's children will. And sometimes, they will bring devastation. But they may also be the waters that birth us into liberation and transformation. The God who loves us and calls us by name will restore us, and will see us through.

² The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", 16 April, 1963

And so I would like to end with a time of silence. I would like you to conjure up the faces of those you know who are passing through treacherous waters, and pray for them. Even if you do not know their names, rest assured that God does. We pray for them:

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 shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel . May it be so. Amen.

My charge is going to come after my benediction:

Hear this blessing from God:

“You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

My charge to you is to go forth now, and see each human being God created as precious, as honored, as loved. May that vision lead you in how you treat your neighbor, and how you respond to the stranger’s distress. You are named and called by God. Go forth, and be disciples. Amen.