

Blessed Troubles, Sanctified Distress
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Isaiah 43:1-7

One of the passages that is often read on Baptism of the Lord Sunday (which was actually last week, but we were snowed out) is this text I'm about to read from the Book of Isaiah. The echoes of this text are heard in the story of Jesus' being baptized by John in the Jordan. Jesus passes through the waters and the river, he hears a voice that says, "You are my child and I love you." But in the Hebrew Scriptures, these words from Isaiah are addressed to the whole people of God, people who have been forcibly taken from their homeland and carried into exile in Babylon, people who surely felt overwhelmed by life, burned by life's circumstances, and perhaps uncertain of God's presence in the midst of all that they had endured.

If you feel, or have ever felt, overwhelmed to the point of drowning, burned, or unsure of God's faithful presence in your life, and who hasn't? I invite you to listen to Isaiah's words as if you yourself are being called by name and assured of that God will not abandon you.

*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.
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, your Savior.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
Because you are precious in my sight,
and honored, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold';
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'*

At the conclusion of today's service, we'll be singing "How Firm a Foundation,"¹ which is my wife Judith's favorite hymn of all time. It's a song I have come to love, too, because of its affirmation that throughout life, and its trials and tribulations, God's loving and abiding presence can provide us something solid in which to place our trust. "*Fear not, I am with Thee, O be not dismayed, for I am*

Thy God and will still give thee aid," the song has God saying, "I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, upheld by my righteous omnipotent hand".

Like "We Shall Overcome", "How Firm a Foundation" is the kind of sturdy song that can sustain and encourage a person, or a community, in hard times. It was Teddy Roosevelt's favorite hymn and it has been sung at the funerals of several U.S. presidents. More personally, I think of how, during our first year in seminary, before Judith and I ever started dating, Judith sang it to a seminary classmate of ours. Over the course of a long night, during which this woman was in the throes of withdrawal, Judith sat on the bathroom tiles and held her head and stroked her hair and sang "*How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in God's excellent word. What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled...*" The happy ending to that story is that, thanks be to God, that young woman, strengthened, helped, and standing, went on to graduate with our class. Thanks be to God, our friend will be celebrating her 30th year in recovery from addiction this fall. In the years since, I'm sure that she has helped countless people on their journeys of recovery, too.

Whenever I come across today's passage from Isaiah, I find myself drawn again to "How Firm a Foundation", particularly the poetry of its third stanza. It's almost as if the hymn writer is channeling the words of the prophet: "*When through the deep waters, I call you to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow, for I will be with you, your troubles to bless, and sanctify to you your deepest distress.*"

What a promise. "*I will be with you, your troubles to bless—and sanctify to you your deepest distress*".

I love the idea that God will somehow bless our troubles and sanctify our distress (or make them useful in shaping us into the sort of people that God wants us to be). Now notice, the words don't say that you and I will never have trouble, sorrow, or distress. They don't say that God brings trouble and distress upon us just so God can teach us some sort of lesson. What the words, and our passage for today, promise is that God will be present in the midst of our problems and that the providence of God can even wrench a blessing from them. This means, at the very least, that what we go through can make us better, more kind and compassionate, more loving and deep people. That's what it means to have our distress sanctified. It becomes a tool that shapes us into something more useful to God.

That, of course, is the kind of statement that those who want to bring comfort and solace to those who are hurting need to handle with extreme care. You don't have to have read Kate Bowler's *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*³ to know that dishing out platitudes and pieties to people in pain often hurts more than it helps. Far better to be present and quiet than to try to provide answers and explanations.

Based on this wisdom, Emily McDowell has created a series of sympathy cards.⁴ One says, "I wish I could take away your pain, or at least take away the people who compare it to the time their hamster died." Then there's, "When people say it's a marathon, not a sprint, I don't think they get how much you hate running." And "Let me be the first to punch the next person who tells you everything happens for a reason."

Another reads, "Together we can find a cure for the phrase, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." But perhaps my very favorite is this one, "If this is God's plan, God is a terrible planner." (Beneath that, in smaller print, are the words, "no offense if you're reading this, God. You did a great job with waterfalls and pandas." Let's grant, shall we, that there are unhelpful things to say and unhelpful times to say them.

That being said, there is something at least a little hopeful in the notion that when troubles happen, God at least has the potential to bring some sort of blessing out of them, whether we know it at the

time or not. That's what the Apostle Paul was trying to get at when he said, "We know that in all things God works for the good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." ⁵

Now the fact that Paul had his share of troubles, and may have written those words from a prison, makes them harder to dismiss. It's a little easier to swallow them knowing that this man went through his own hard times. Regardless, the notion that troubles can be blessed is exceedingly hard to see in the middle of the troubles.

Sometimes, quite honestly, hard times can just seem like too much. To say that the rivers of sorrow will not overflow, doesn't mean that there aren't times when we feel like we're being dragged under. It doesn't mean we don't find ourselves gasping for air and being swept along by a current that is beyond our control as we live into the news of a dear one's life-threatening illness, or cope with the untimely death of a spouse, parent, or a dear friend, or do the hard work of caring for an elderly parent, or a partner with dementia, or a tantrum-ing toddler or a surly teenager. If you've ever lived in the throes of depression, you know that sometimes the rivers of sorrow threaten to overflow their banks and to pull us down. You can ask the hundreds of thousands of people affected by the government shutdown, some of them in our own congregation, and they'll tell you first-hand about how high and swift the waters can get, as can refugees and immigrants fleeing peril, as can families who have lost loved ones to violence, as can anyone who has ever felt overwhelmed.

Sometimes it is hard enough to see how God is with you or me, let alone to see how God can bring some good out of a situation. So what is to be done? A few thoughts that I need to hear as much as you do:

1. **Hang On to God.** When the waters are rising, look for a flotation device and cling to it. It might be prayer, it might be singing old hymns, it might be daily gratitude lists, or meditation or any one of a hundred other spiritual practices. It might even be listening carefully to the words of sermon to hear in them the reaffirmation that God really is with you in the midst of this trial. You have **not** been abandoned. There **will be** another day. On the other side, you will have wisdom to share and understanding to give and strength to impart, about recovery, about the challenge of parenting, about how a person can survive terrible loss or trauma, about life and faith. About what it means to be human.

I think of the great poet Mary Oliver, who died this week at the age of 83. She developed such a gift for attention, for listening to life and nature, and some of that was a consequence of what she had to endure, a consequence of it, not just in spite of it. That is the way it is with so many of the great poets.

Mary Oliver knew pain in her life, including the pain of being abused as a child. In an interview several years ago, she told Maria Shriver, "I had a very dysfunctional family, and a very hard childhood. So I made a world out of words. And it was my salvation." ⁶ It wasn't just her salvation, it was ours, too. Her sanctified distress gave many of us another handhold to God.

Upon learning of her death, I shared the following poem with friends. It's called "I Worried". Imagine that I would be drawn to a poem with that title!

*"I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not how shall
I correct it?*

*Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?*

*Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.*

*Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?*

*Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.”⁷*

Mary Oliver helped me to sing.

2. Remember that whatever you are experiencing, **you are not the only person to have ever undergone something like it.** Yes, some may have gone through similar situations and been overwhelmed to the point of giving up. Yes, some may have absolutely no idea of the pain you are feeling. Yes, some will say the absolute wrong thing at absolutely the wrong time, but others have been through it and they found a way to hang on. So look for the ones who hung on and ask them how. They may help you to learn to pay attention. They may tell you that parenting a young adult is not a terminal condition. They may tell you that they made it, and they believe that you can, too.

3. Keep in mind that Jesus’ baptism and ours is not divine fire insurance or some kind of magic charm that helps us avoid hardship in life. Indeed, **it is an induction into a community that knows that suffering will come, sometimes precisely because we are faithful, but it also knows that suffering does not get the last word. Love does.**

Tomorrow is the day we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and legacy. He knew about the way the waters of hardship can almost overflow and take you down with them, and he prayed with Amos for the day when *justice* would flow down like waters and *righteousness* like an everflowing stream.⁸

On the night of January 27th of 1956, around the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the phone in his home rang and he picked it up and heard on the other end a voice breathing death threats against him and his family. It drove him to his knees and pushed him to a new faith.

King realized that even though he was a pastor, his faith was much more brittle than he had imagined. Growing up in a religious household, — his father and grandfather were ministers — he believed that his faith would be automatically conveyed from generation to generation, like a surname or a favorite watch.

“It was kind of inherited religion,” King said, “and I had never felt an experience with God in the way that you must . . . if you’re going to walk the lonely paths of this life.”

As he prayed that Friday evening, he had a moment of revelation. In that experience, King believed that he heard the voice of God channeled to him, providing new purpose and security in those dark hours. Later, King recalled, “at that moment, I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And, lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’”

Even though he was a preacher, it was the first time King had his own personal, intimate encounter with God. It was an encounter that endowed him with a deep sense of peace and purpose for the journey ahead. His troubles were blessed and his distress became sanctified and he died before he was forty years old.

A last comment. At every moment in life, we are either in the river or somehow up on the bank, heaving a sigh of relief that we made it through and didn't get pulled under this time. At every moment we are either in the river or somehow on the bank.

Those of us who find ourselves on the riverbank would do well to remember the people currently in the river. Throw them a rope. Lend them an ear. Don't just sit on the shore and say, "Hey, it's great over here. One day you'll be out of the river, too."

Throw them a rope. It might look like a sandwich bag that says, "We love you" stuffed with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for somebody at the shelter in Falls Church. It might look like a cup of coffee with a friend, or a visit to the hospital. It might look like warm chicken stew.

But throw them a rope. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1 "How Firm a Foundation", Authors attributed, separately: R Keen and George Keith (ca. 1787).

2. "We Shall Overcome", Author attributed: Charles Albert Tindley (1900).

3. Kate Bowler. *Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I've Loved*. (New York, Random House, 2018).

4. Emily McDowell. <http://www.emilymcdowell.com>

5. Romans 8:28 Holy Bible NIV (New International Version).

6. Maria Shriver "<http://www.oprah.com/entertainment/maria-shriver-interviews-poet-mary-oliver>"

7. Mary Oliver. "I Worried" in *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*.

8. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*. April, 1963.

9. Martin Luther King, Jr. speech *Why Jesus Called a Man a Fool* (1967) delivered at Mount Pisgah Missionary Baptist Church, Chicago, 1967.