FMC January 9, 2022

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Passing Through the Waters

Perhaps, like me, you have seen a number of cartoons and memes about the new year. One in particular caught my eye. Two creatures are discussing the new year. The first asks, “Aren’t you terrified of what 2022 could be like? Everything is so messed up…” The second replies, “I think it will bring flowers.” The first is astonished, ‘YES? WHY?” The second replies, “Because I’m planting flowers.”

We will come back to the flowers later, but I want to pick up on the statement, “Everything is so messed up…” After nearly two years of the coronavirus, we have experienced social distancing, masks, and the choice to be or not to be vaccinated. Each time we make progress another wave comes with a new variant. So, we take a step back. The choir takes a month’s break. We limit our hymns. We forego the coffee bar.

In the news we are bombarded with rhetoric about everything from politics to vaccines. A year ago, we watched as a mob stormed our nation’s capital. We have experienced rising fuel prices and shortages of some goods. We have seen wildfires and extreme weather. We have watched humanitarian crises develop at our border, and most recently in Afghanistan. We’ve followed the trials of Kyle Rittenhouse and the assailants of Ahmaud Arbery. We want justice that goes beyond vengeance but roots out the causes of injustice. Some of us have had covid. And we’ve all lost loved ones. Everything does seem to be a mess! We long for normal, and yet we know that “normal” might be something new, not the normal of the past.

So where is God? Has God forgotten us? Does God care about the way the world is right now? Is God leaving us to sink in the mess we have made with our own mistakes and sins? Does God seem distant? Our questions are not that different from those the Israelites were asking while in exile in Babylon. Why had God allowed the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, and even the Temple itself? Why did God allow the Babylonians to bring its inhabitants into exile far away? Why were God’s people so scattered? Had God abandoned them because of their mistakes, their sins? Or was the Babylonian god Marduk stronger than Yahweh?

Isaiah chapters 40 through 55 deals with the end of the Babylonian exile. It is often referred to as Second Isaiah. In our text today the prophet reminds the people of Yahweh’s faithfulness and covenant with them. “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.”

Created, formed, redeemed, and called by name. These actions of God recall not only the creation story from Genesis 1, but also the creation of the people of Israel and the renaming of Jacob to Israel by Yahweh. Genesis 32:28 “For you have fought with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Names were important. They revealed a person’s character and identity. To give a new name is to recognize a new beginning, a new character. Israel’s name became the name of a people who belong exclusively to Yahweh, who gave them that name.

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through the 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.”

God did not promise that there would be no hard times. God did not promise that things would always be easy or comfortable. God did not promise that there would be no trials or tribulations. What God promised was to be present, to walk alongside, to sustain.

For the Israelites, the allusion to water may have recalled both the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan River when their ancestors entered the Promised Land. Fire and flame may have recalled the burning of Jerusalem, but also are metaphors for any danger. But the people are not to fear, “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Each name that Yahweh speaks reminds the people of their relationship with their Creator. Yahweh isn’t unknown to them. They have a history together. “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.”

The idea of ransom is found in both Old and New Testaments. It is the price paid in order to redeem something. The Jewish sacrificial system was based on the idea that the lives of animals could be sacrificed to ransom people from the penalty of sin, see Leviticus 17:11. In the New Testament Jesus says, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28) Paul also refers to Jesus as the Christ “who gave himself as a ransom for all” (see 1 Timothy 2:5-6)

In our text today the idea is that Yahweh will in some manner “purchase” the freedom of the Israelite exiles. The passage concludes, “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.

Richard Niell Donovan, a retired Disciples in Christ clergyman, notes that here, Yahweh speaks of “everyone who is called by my name,’ suggesting that the name that he has given them is his own name. If we are God’s people—and we are—then we were created in God’s image and bear God’s name.” We give glory to God, not only in our worship when we pray and sing hymns, but also in our daily life, when we live by God’s ways and seek God’s intentions for our world.

To “go through fire and water” has come to mean facing many challenges or perils. In our own Anabaptist tradition, we think of the martyrs who suffered persecution. Many of them met death by fire or drowning. Indeed, Menno Simons wrote in a letter to Gellius Faber in 1544: “We preach, as much as is possible, by day and by night, in houses and in fields, in forests and wastes, hither and yon, at home or abroad, in prison and in dungeons, in water and in fire, on the scaffold and on the wheel, before lords and princes, through mouth and pen, with possessions and blood, with life and death. We have done this many years, and we are not ashamed of the Gospel of the glory of Christ. For we feel his loving fruit and patience and willing sacrifices of our faithful brethren and companions in Christ Jesus. We could wish that we might save all mankind from the jaws of hell, free them from the chains of their sins, and by the gracious help of God add them to Christ by the Gospel of His peace. For this is the true nature of the love which is of God.”

We are Christians. We carry the name of Christ, who taught us to love God and to love our neighbor, even our enemy. We follow Christ, who taught us that to be great means to serve, and that compassion is better than ritual. We follow Christ, who gave his life for the world and told us that those who follow are his brothers and sisters and mother, his family. The way we choose to live either brings glory or dishonor to Jesus the Christ…because we carry his name.

So what about us? What about us as we face a new year, a year of uncertainty, a year that carries the burdens and challenges of past and present? Yahweh tells us, “Don’t be afraid. 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 you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

Jesus, the One whose name we carry, invites us to take up our cross and follow. No promises of comfortable lifestyles, no promises that it will be easy, no promises that everything will be rosy. Instead the promise of God’s Spirit, the Comforter, who will lead us and guide us and teach us, the promise of God with us.

So that brings me back to flowers. “I think the new year will bring flowers.” Let us plant the flowers of hope, of compassion, of kindness. Let us plant a field with the flowers of justice, the flowers of welcome and hospitality, the flowers of creation care, the flowers of God’s shalom. Let us fill every open space in that field with the flowers of God’s love for all people, to God’s glory. May it be so this year.