

NOT ON A CRUISE SHIP

Isaiah 43:1-7

Thalassaphobia: *Thalassa* means *sea* and *phobia* means *fear*. So *thalassaphobia* means *fear of the sea*. That's a legitimate phobia, when you think about it. The ocean can be a place of danger and even death. Take to the water and you have to deal with waves, wind, tides, currents, rocky shorelines and ever-changing weather conditions. You know what lies on the bottom of the ocean and twitches, don't you? A nervous wreck!

When you venture out onto the ocean, you want to be surrounded by as large a ship as possibly. And fortunately Royal Caribbean cruise line has now launched an authentic sea monster. Called *Oasis of the Seas*, it's the largest, tallest, widest, heaviest and costliest passenger ship ever built. How big is it? According to *Atlantic magazine* (June, 2009), it dwarfs a Nimitz class aircraft carrier, stands taller than a 20-story building and carries 8,000 people. It isn't a boat; it's a floating city. *Oasis of the Seas* features 21 swimming pools, including a water park, a beach pool and two wave pools, a theater that seats 1,400 and a green space called *Central Park*, which is half the size of a football field and full of tropical plants and 20-foot trees. ("*Thalassaphobia*" and details about the Oasis of the Sea from *Homiletics Magazine*, January – February, 2010, p.14)

Fear not, (says the Lord, for) "*when you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; and when you walk through fire you shall not be burned.*" (Isaiah 43:2)

Isaiah gives us a stirring and beautiful passage, but what exactly is God saying here? Is he promising us safe passage through deep water in luxury on something like the *Oasis of the Sea*? I'm sure most of us would wish for that, but God didn't promise to float us above the deep waters, but rather that he would be with us when we go through them. We aren't promised the protection and luxury of a cruise ship, but rather the presence of our living Lord.

And we do go through some deep and rough water: Unemployment, financial hardship, sickness, the death of a loved one, cancer, depression, loneliness, divorce, failure... you know the kinds of deep water that we all sometimes have to navigate. And no matter how good our insurance policies, no matter how deep our nest egg or secure our safety net, no amount of wealth or strength or charm or good works or faith or religion will protect us from having to navigate those deep waters. And no ship of our own devising will carry us high and dry in luxury above such deep waters.

It's not a question of *if*, but rather *when* we face the fearful swells of the dreaded deep, that God promises us in Isaiah that he will be with us. He doesn't promise us that we'll stay high and dry or even that we won't get wet but that we won't be overwhelmed. He doesn't promise us that when we pass through the fires we won't get singed but that we will somehow get through. God will be with us.

There are some beautiful promises in Isaiah 43:1-7. First of all Isaiah tells us that God knows us. In fact he formed us. He knows each of us by name. We are his own precious creation and he claims us as his own. The second thing we are promised is that the God who formed us is also the God who will *redeem* us. “To be *redeemed* according to Israel’s law meant to be bought out of human bondage by one’s kin.” God promises to *redeem* Israel out of captivity in Babylon, but in so doing God also claims the close relationship of *kinship*. (*Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4*, p. 221) Next we are told to *fear not* because God will be with us. No matter how great the challenge or how difficult the hardship we can go through it without being afraid for our God goes with us. In this passage God is willing to pay Israel’s ransom, no matter what the cost. He promises that he will gather them from the ends of the earth and that they will become that for which he formed them – a vehicle to proclaim his name, witnesses to his glory.

This First Sunday of Epiphany is the Feast day of Jesus’ Baptism. Jesus’ baptism also tells us some very important things about going through water: not the water of the dreaded deep, but the water of our baptisms. Look what happened to Jesus at his baptism. Jesus was claimed as God’s own. The voice proclaimed from heaven, “*you are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.*” God’s Spirit came upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. And the heavens were opened to him.

Jesus leads the way for us through the water of baptism. The same epiphanies given to Jesus at his baptism are given to us in our baptisms. God claims us as his own, God adopts us as his beloved sons and daughters. God gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit. God opens for us the heavens. We can speak to him and he will hear us. There is no barrier that divides us. No matter how far we may stray the possibility of God’s love and God’s grace is always available to us.

In the Baptismal prayer we remember that in the water of baptism “*we are buried with Christ in his death... We share in his resurrection...and we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*” (BCP, p. 306) That is certainly not something we experience as an infant or young child in baptism, but nonetheless it is a reality of what it means to be baptized that we share in Christ’s death and resurrection. The sacrament of belonging to God includes sharing in Jesus’ death on a cross and rising with him through the power of Holy Spirit to new life. That is our redemption. And it is a redemption by our kin, by our Father God who loves us and spared no cost, pouring out the life of his Son Jesus, for our redemption.

Finally in baptism we are marked with the sign of the cross on our foreheads and *sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever*. In that sealing and in that sign upon our foreheads we are promised that God will never let us go and that God will always be with us.

And so it is through our baptisms that we discover the reality of the beautiful promises of Isaiah 43. I know no place where those promises are spoken more beautifully than in Hymn #637 *How firm a foundation you saints of the Lord:*

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said—
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

“Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy trouble to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply;
The flame shall not harm thee; I only design
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

“The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

All of us suffer to some degree from *thalassaphobia*; we fear the chaos represented by the deep ocean. But God promises in Isaiah 43 and in our baptisms that he will be with us. He won’t float us high and dry above the turmoil, pain and difficulties of life no matter what plans and vehicles we may build to protect us. But he will be with us. He does love us. He made us to be his own and he calls us each by name. He will not let us go; not ever! He was willing to pay any cost even the cost of the death of his own Son to help us live, to set us free and ultimately to bring us home to him. He made us to be his servants, to show forth his glory, to shine with his light for all to see. Therefore *be not afraid!* Amen.