

The Baptism of Our Lord (C) – January 9, 2022
Isaiah 43:1-7

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Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'm not a fan of superhero movies or James Bond sorts of thrillers. And I never got in to comic books either, although lots of really smart people whom I admire seem to love them. But I am aware of a convention that all of these use: when the villains capture the heroes, but instead of dispatching them immediately, they explain their whole evil plan to take over the world or whatever and, of course, to kill the hero in the bargain. And this is their big mistake, because inevitably the heroes use the delay, and the information, to turn the tables on the villains and save the day. It seems silly and contrived to me. Don't tell us what you're going to do. Just do it. Apologies to all of the superhero and James Bond fans. Sorry if that rains on your parade or "harshes your mellow," as they say.

It occurred to me, though, that people might think the same thing about prophecy, especially prophecy of the positive kind that we get in today's first reading. This passage is one of the most moving and comforting passages in all of the Bible. I have used it many times in pastoral care situations with people who are facing difficulty of one kind or another. As the note in the bulletin says, it was originally written to the people of Israel toward the end of their exile in Babylon, some forty years after they had been conquered, the city of Jerusalem sacked, and the temple of Solomon destroyed. Now, I don't want to minimize our current predicament as we temporarily head back into exclusively virtual worship, with the Omicron variant of the COVID-19 virus spiking and the Delta variant still causing problems as well, but how would you like to go through another 38 years of this? Of course we won't have to. But it makes me wonder, after all those years of exile why God is now sending word through Isaiah that the exile will be over soon. Why tell them that? It's like the supervillain thing, only in reverse because God is the opposite of a supervillain. God is announcing the good things God is planning to do. By why do that? Why not just do those good things, and end the exile already? Maybe my experience of the pandemic is affecting my reading of the text. It probably is. And maybe that's not a bad thing.

This of course goes back to the age-old question of why bad things happen, and particularly why bad things happen to "good people," as the book title and the saying go. I won't get us into the theological weeds by asking if there is really any such thing as a good person, even if Jesus himself went there. But there are certainly cases in which some people suffer disproportionately because of the misdeeds of others. The Bible explains Israel's conquest and exile as the consequence of Israel's unfaithfulness. But if you read the account of that unfaithfulness, it's mostly down to the failure of Israel's kings, together with Israel's rich and powerful elites, who fail to care for God's people as their shepherds, who fail to practice justice, and who exploit the poor for their own advantage. And yet those same poor, those same people who are treated unjustly and unkindly, suffer the same consequences as the ones who are mostly responsible for them.

Maybe you're recognizing that dynamic in our current situation. Most of you, maybe even all of you, are fully vaccinated, and those who are eligible are boosted. You wear masks when you go out in public, including when we gather here for worship. You observe physical distancing and you wash your hands for 20 seconds. You have done, and continue to do your part in helping us to achieve herd immunity and end the pandemic. And so you are angry that too many of our fellow citizens have been convinced by fringe conspiracy theorists and cynical mainstream politicians to mistrust and resist vaccinations and masking and other public health

measures. They are the ones who are driving this latest spike in infections, and who are eating up the resources of our healthcare system. As of yesterday there were 99 COVID patients at Carle Hospital, and 94% of the ICU beds were occupied.

So you are probably right to be angry. But you probably also know that things aren't as simple as we often assume or wish. Those three vaccine shots that I have gotten, and many of you too? Many people around the world have not been afforded that luxury. They don't have the access to the vaccine that we have. The Omicron variant arose in Africa, where only around 10 percent of people have been vaccinated. Those are mostly poor nations. We are a rich one. My third shot could have been someone else's first shot. So you and I, while we have been part of the solution locally, have also been part of the problem globally. And this is, I'll remind you, a global pandemic. We need to be in this together. Sorry to complicate your righteous anger.

God, of course, realizes that righteous anger cannot be the end of the story, because otherwise the story would be over, for all of us. But God does not want the story to be over. So God, the only one truly entitled to righteous anger, lets go of righteous anger to spare us who deserve it. To God's covenant people who violated the covenant, God says, "do not fear, I have redeemed you." "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you." "When you walk through fire ... the flame shall not consume you." These promise of God to God's people are also testimony of what God has already done. God has been with the through fire and water, through the exodus, through the wilderness, eve through the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of God's people. God has been with them every step of the way, and God will not abandon them, even if God has every right to.

You and I are not part of that original covenant people. But we have been made God's new covenant people through Jesus Christ. By his own baptism by John in the Jordan River, Jesus joins himself to our reality and our predicament, and by our baptism into his death and resurrection we have been joined to his reality and his victory over the powers of sin, death, and evil.

Why am I telling you this? Why not let it be what it is without broadcasting it? Why not just let Jesus do Jesus' work of liberating us from sin, death, and evil and ushering in the Kingdom of God in its fullness... you know, just wake us up when it's over? It's because God wants to make you and me part of the solution. Because that's how we become who God created us to be – and is creating us to be. God is reminding us of God's faithfulness so that we will trust God's promise continued faithfulness through whatever life may throw at us, including pandemics. God is reminding us of God's mercy so that we are not only thankful for that mercy, but so that we are moved to be merciful with one another. God is reminding us of God's love for us so that we will also love God and those whom God loves – which is everyone – and make that love known in concrete actions and commitments to the common good.

May God grant us grace to trust the good news that God broadcasts through apostles, prophets, and baptize ones like me and you. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.