

Through the Waters
Isaiah 43:1 – 7; Matthew 28:16 – 20
April 22, 2018 (Easter 4)

So we hear Jesus' words here, what is commonly referred to as the Great Commission, where he commissions his disciples to, "Go and make *more* disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." In the 2,000 years since he spoke these words, there have basically been two kinds of responses to the Great Commission. The first response has been to go out and make the whole world Christian; to convert (or just baptize) everyone and bring the whole world under the power and authority of Jesus Christ. This way of hearing Jesus' words has led to some painful, destructive, oppressive expressions of our faith throughout the centuries – African slaves and Native Americans being *forcibly* baptized and made Christians; European missionaries going into Asia and Africa and South America and imposing their way of life and faith on them, making *them* like *us*, with no regard for their traditions and customs and ways of life and faith. People have been robbed of their land and their identity in the name of fulfilling the Great Commission. So that's been the *first* response – we have to *make* the whole world Christian.

The second respond has been to almost ignore Jesus' words altogether. To recognize the damage that has been done by that first approach and go to the *other* extreme. It's saying, "You have your way of life and faith (or *not* faith), and I have mine, and we're just going to let that be. I'm Christian, you're Jewish or Muslim or atheist, and that's fine. You do what works for you, and I'll do what works for me, and we will just coexist." We don't want to impose our way on anyone else, so we *don't* make disciples of all nations.

But neither of these ways get at the heart of what Jesus is talking about. So what does it mean for us to participate in the Great Commission – to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in

the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded, and remembering that he is with us always? How can we do that in a way that is both faithful to Jesus Christ and loving toward our neighbor?

When I got here on Monday morning, I went into the office, turned on the lights, and started to walk through Lara's office back to my office, when I noticed that it was *raining* on me. *In the office*. Water was coming down from the light fixtures in the ceiling, and *everything* was soaked – the carpet, her desk, her computer, the papers on her desk. I quickly turned the lights back off and ran downstairs to grab some towels to start cleaning up. When I got down to the kitchen, I noticed that there was water dripping down from the cabinet onto the countertop. I'm standing there looking at it thinking, "Where is it *coming* from? How is it getting *here*?" That part of the kitchen is not directly below Lara's office. It's below *my* office. So then I'm thinking, "Oh no, where *else* is water coming in?" I start looking all over the building – my office, the sanctuary, the Kean Room, the Fellowship Hall, *everywhere*. John McClintick came up and found some moisture in a ceiling tile in the hallway where we have had problems before, but aside from that, we fortunately didn't find any other water.

We got things cleaned up as best we could, contacted the appropriate people, got Lara set up in a different room, and tried to go on with the rest of the day. Later that afternoon, I'm sitting at my desk, and I reach to get a book on the shelf in front of me. I open it up and start flipping through pages and find myself thinking, "Why does this *feel weird*?" That's when I noticed that the bottom part of the book around the binding was wet. So I quickly start looking at all the *other* books on the shelf, but *none of them* are wet. Only this one book. I find a little bit of moisture on the shelf, but *not* in the place where the *book* was wet. At this point it's driving me crazy! *Where is this water coming from? How is it getting to all these random places?*

We'd had that big storm the night before – lots of wind and driving rain – and apparently there was some place on the roof that was allowing water to get in. Water, as you may know, follows the path of least resistance. Wherever it *can* go, it *will* go. So it came in through the roof into Lara's office and then found a path down the inside of the walls into the kitchen. It came into the hallway ceiling and followed some path through the walls down into my bookshelf.

If you have ever had a leak or flood in your house, then you know how truly helpless and chaotic it can feel to be at the mercy of water. We can't *control* it (hard as we may try), it goes *wherever*, and it *finds a way*. The irony is that we are *so dependent* on water to live. But *too much* of it (in the wrong places) can create absolute chaos.

This is actually a theme that is prevalent in Jewish theology and all throughout scripture – the association between *water* and *chaos*. It starts in the very beginning, before the creation of the world. The first verses of the Bible say that “in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” So it wasn't just *nothing*; there was *water*. Ancient Jewish people believed that before the world was created, there was just a formless mass of water; a shifting, swirling, watery chaos.

In the story of Noah, human beings have become so sinful that God wants to wipe out evil from the face of the earth and start over. So God sends a flood that covers the whole earth. It goes back to the way it was in the beginning. Chaotic waters that no one could control come and wipe out life.

The psalms talk over and over again about surging, roaring waters that are swallowing them up, and everything is out of their control.

Jesus is out on a boat with his disciples when a storm pops up, and the waters start surging and shifting and pouring into the boat, creating chaos, and they think they are going to die.

All of these stories, all throughout scripture, show the connection, in their minds, between water and chaos. They can't control it; it goes wherever; and it finds a way.

But also, in all of these stories throughout scripture, God exercises power over the water and brings order out of chaos. In Genesis the world is nothing but swirling, shifting, chaotic waters. But then God *speaks* and separates the waters and creates dry land where *life* can exist. In Noah's time God makes the waters of the flood recede so that there's dry land again, and God preserves a remnant in Noah and his family, so that life can continue to exist. When the people of Israel are leaving slavery in Egypt, God parts the waters of the sea, allowing them to pass through on dry land, escaping Pharaoh and his army, so that life can continue to exist. In the psalms whenever it talks about the chaotic waters, every single time it goes on to talk about how God has *power* over the waters. Psalm 104 says, "At your rebuke the waters flee. At the sound of your thunder, they take flight. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth." Jesus stands up on a boat in the midst of that storm, as water is pouring in all around them and they think they're going to die, and he says, "Peace! Be still!" The storm stops, and the disciples say, "Who is this, that even the winds and the water obey him?"

All throughout scripture, God exercises power over the waters and brings order out of chaos, so that life can continue to exist. We see it in this reading from Isaiah, where God says, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you.” God enters in to the chaos of life and delivers God’s people through the waters. The promise that we have here is that, while we cannot control the chaos of life, God *can*, God goes *wherever*, and God finds a way.

As Christians, we experience this promise through baptism. God redeems us through the waters so that new life can exist. In baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, entering into this new way of life wherein we die to self, giving up control over our lives, and trusting in God’s presence to guide us wherever we go. To be baptized means that we enter into this story where we cannot control the chaos of life, but we live faithfully according to Jesus’ teachings and trust in God’s presence with us every step of the way.

So, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit, means that we invite *all people* to live into that same story. Not in a way that is coercive or dominating or controlling, as has so often been the case throughout history. But in a way that says, “Life is chaotic, but we believe that in Jesus Christ, we glimpse the God who brings *order* out of chaos and makes life possible – *new* life; *real*, *abundant* life, with God and with each other.”

The important thing to understand is that there is a difference between *converting* people – making *Christians* – and making *disciples*. Jesus does not say, “Go out and convert the world and make Christians of all nations.” (A quick aside, when Jesus says *nations*, he’s not talking about America and Canada and Mexico and other *nation states*. It’s the Greek word *ethnos*,

where we get the word *ethnicity*. So it's referring more to *race* or *tribe*, like the people of Israel were a tribe based on race or ethnicity. And for Jesus to say, "make disciples of *all nations*," was a bit surprising, because Matthew's gospel was written from a very *Jewish* perspective in which Jesus was the Jewish messiah who had come to redeem the people of Israel. But *now* he's saying, "This is for *everyone* – Jews *and* Gentiles. *All* people of *all* races and ethnicities are welcome in the Kingdom of God.")

So we are called to *make disciples* of all nations. A disciple is a *student*; it's someone who *learns* from a teacher. Jesus says to make disciples of all nations, "teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." What has Jesus commanded and taught us to do? To love. To give our lives for one another. To pray. To heal. To feed those who are hungry. To stand up for those who are oppressed. To do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. We are called to teach *others* that way of life. We don't teach it by forcing it on them or persuading them and convincing them or just talking to them about it. It's not a set of *doctrines*; it's a *way of life*. We teach it by *living* it. That's how *Jesus* taught it to *his* disciples. It's about modeling, through word and deed, the way of Jesus Christ.

We so often overlook what happens at the *beginning* of this story. Matthew says that the disciples went up on this mountain, and when they *saw* Jesus, they *worshipped* him; but it says *some doubted*. Some of the disciples, the people who followed Jesus the closest and knew him the best, *doubted*. Still, though, the disciples worshipped him in the midst of their doubts. And Jesus calls them to go and make *more* disciples who recognize the lordship of Jesus Christ and worship him even in the midst of their doubts. Doubts do not *disqualify* you from being a disciple, because to be a disciple is to be a *student* who is learning and growing. And all throughout the gospels, doubts seem to come part and parcel with that.

Life can be chaotic, and there are times when we are filled with doubts as to what we should do or whether God is with us at all. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not about reconciling all of that, squaring it all away and making sense of it all. It's about living in ways that trust that, in the midst of all the chaos, God is in control, God is with us wherever we go, and God finds a way to make life possible. To participate in the Great Commission means that we walk with others through the chaotic waters of life, living in ways that demonstrate that trust, and bearing witness to the way of Jesus Christ. Because when others see that in us, it is the best proof that we can give of the difference that Christ has made in our lives.