

Through the Waters  
Isaiah 43:1 – 7; Luke 3:21 – 22; Romans 8:18 – 27  
Sunday, January 13, 2019

It has been a hard week for our church family. Losing someone we love is hard enough. But the fact that that person was only 16 years old, his whole life in front of him, and that he was such a *good, kind, gentle, funny, loving* person who had to endure things along the way that most of us cannot imagine, makes it that much harder. It raises all kinds of questions and doubts in us. We question the *fairness* of a world where the young and innocent suffer and die while others live long lives of cruelty or indifference. We question how God could let this happen. Why didn't God *heal* him? *Where was God?*

And while those are questions that faithful people have been struggling with for *thousands* of years that we are never going to be able to fully answer or understand this side of eternity (much less in one sermon), we still have to ask them. Because faith is a conversation with God, and sometimes – as we have seen in countless faithful people throughout scripture – our part of that conversation is *Why?* And God is not *afraid* of those questions; God is not angered or upset or disappointed by them, because God is big enough to handle all of our questions and doubts, and God wants the conversation. God wants all of our questions and doubts – all of *us* – because when we are bringing all of those things to God, *that* is an act of *faith*. We're not walking away or taking them somewhere else and ending the conversation; we're taking them to *God*. We're engaging God, even in the midst of our doubts.

Faith is not about *certainty* – *seeing* and *knowing*. Faith is about *trusting* where we *cannot* see and we *do not* know. And that kind of faith is not easy.

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We live in a broken world. A world that does not work the way God *created* it to work. Paul talks about creation being “subjected to futility” and in “bondage to decay” and “groaning” in pain. And we see proof of *that* every single day of our lives. We live in a world where there is violence and war and injustice, a world where there is cancer and car accidents. We live in a world with bodies that can get sick and broken and die. And *none of that* is the way that God *intended* it to be. And whether you attribute that brokenness to *sin* or *evil* or just *chaos*, that is our reality.

Nowhere does God promise us that this will be easy. Nowhere does God say that, “If you trust in me and live your life by my teachings, it will all be smooth sailing. You will never have to face pain and suffering and adversity.” In fact, we look at *Jesus* and what do we see – God becoming one of us and *suffering*; experiencing pain and betrayal and the loss of people he loved. Jesus did not avoid suffering; he suffered *with* us and *for* us.

A life of faith is not about *avoiding* pain and suffering and loss. It is about, when those things come, *how do we keep holding on*, to God and to each other?

God never promises us that any of this will be *easy*. What God promises us is that God will *love us* and be *with us* through it all. We see it in Isaiah, where God says, “*When* you pass through the waters – not *if* you pass through the waters, but *when*, because God knows it’s going to happen – and *when* you walk through the fire, *do not fear*, for I am *with* you. You are precious in my sight, and I love you. Though the waters may get higher than you can bear, they will not *overwhelm* you. And though the flames may be hotter than you can bear, they will not *consume* you.”

The night that Oliver died, I was talking with his parents about our own experience of losing a child. I told them, “This is the hardest thing you will ever have to go through in your life. Nothing will ever come close to touching it. But you’re still going to wake up in the morning. You may not want to get out of *bed*, but you’re still going to be here.” Because though you may pass through the waters, they will not overwhelm you, and though you may walk through the fire, it will not consume you. “For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; *you are mine.*”

We live in a broken world that does not work the way God intended it to work, but the good news is that we belong to a God who loves us and is with us through all the pain and suffering and heartache of life, and God is at work *redeeming* the world, *healing* the world, setting it right again. Paul writes that the sufferings of this present time are *not worth comparing* with the *glory* about to be revealed to us. Creation is waiting to be *set free*. The pain that is causing it to groan is *labor pain*, because God is giving birth to something *new* in this world and in *us*. We are waiting, he says, for the *redemption of our bodies*. Bodies that get sick, bodies that get cancer, bodies that get broken and die are being *redeemed*, made *whole* again. Because God created us, not for *suffering*, but for *glory*.

We may not see any *proof* of that redemption right now. We may look around us and see nothing but sickness and sadness and suffering and death. But, Paul says, hope that is *seen* is not *hope*. For who hopes for what is *seen*? If you’re *hoping* for something, that’s because it’s not *there* yet. But if we hope for what we do *not* see, we wait for it with patience. And God *knows* that this kind of hope and faith and trust is *hard*. There are going to be times when we are so discouraged and down and empty that we don’t even have the words to *say* to God. But, Paul says, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit

intercedes with sighs too deep for words. That when it's so hard that all we can do is *sigh*, God *hears* that, because God knows what is in our hearts and on our minds, and God speaks the language of the sigh.

If we kept reading, we would see that Paul *goes on* to say, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God." Now, a lot of times we understand this as saying that God *causes* everything that happens; that this is all part of God's will. But *cancer* is not God's will. A 16-year-old dying – *anyone* dying – is not God's will. Jesus Christ *shows us* what God's will is, and in Jesus we see that God's will is *healing* and *wholeness* and *forgiveness* and *love* and *life*. Jesus did not say to the leper or to Lazarus, "Well, sorry, this is just God's will for you." Jesus *healed* the sick and *raised* the dead. *That* is the will of God.

What Paul is talking about here is something else. He is saying that God can take all these painful, broken pieces in our lives and turn them into something *new* and *lifegiving*. That's what it *means* to *redeem* something. It's like when you look at an old soda bottle that says, "Redeem me, 5 cents." What does that mean? It means that you take this thing that is worthless – an old empty bottle – and you turn it into something of *worth*. God does the same thing with *us*. When we lost our first child, that was not God's will. It was a random, tragic situation without any *worth*. But God took that and said, "I can *give* this worth. I can *use this* to *do something* in you and in the world." And God turned it into this experience that allowed me to be with *another* family that lost a child. God *redeemed* it and made it *worth* something.

God can take even the worst, most painful thing in our lives and use it to make something *good*, even if we can't see it now. And I have seen *proof* of that this week.

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Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. And what we *see* in Jesus' baptism is God announcing to the world, "You are my beloved Son." Baptism announces to the world that we belong to God. But it *also* announces to the world that we belong to *each other*. Baptism reflects the cleansing of our sin, but it *also* marks our entrance into the Body of Christ, this community of faith. In baptism we make promises to love and support and nurture one another, walking the way of Jesus Christ together. And I have seen you doing that, *being the church*, this week.

I saw it on Tuesday when a group of youth and adults filled the youth room and sat for two hours telling stories about Oliver, telling jokes and laughing, but then asking deep, serious questions, and seeing the adults in the group doing their best to *answer* those questions out of their own experiences, sharing their faith.

I saw it on Thursday with the youth gathering to make hundreds of "Team Oliver" bracelets to give out at Oliver's service. And adults gathering in the Fellowship Hall to make pillowcases to help complete Oliver's Eagle Scout project that will provide bright, funny, cheerful pillowcases for children who are in the hospital, bringing a little bit more *joy* into their lives.

I saw it in over 50 people stand at a graveside in freezing temperatures on Thursday and 500 people gathering for that service yesterday to show their love for Oliver and support his family. I saw it in the hugs that were given and the notes that were written, even though we don't have the words. I have seen it in things as simple as the serving of food and the setting up of chairs and the cleaning up of tables. I have seen you *being the church* this week, and I am *so* proud and *so* grateful to God for *you*.

Because in this painful, sad, impossible situation, we find God's presence in *each other*. We experience God's love through *each other*. So if we look at Oliver's death and say, "Where was God," God was in *you*. Our calling as the church, as the baptized people of God, is to bear witness to God's presence and love in the world. It is to say, "When you pass through the waters and through the flames, *I* will be with you, and God will be in the love that we share."

I can't tell you *why* this happened. But I can tell you what God is *doing* with it. God is *using* it to make God's presence and love known; to make us into the people that God created us to be; to *redeem* this broken world and move us one step closer to glory. Whatever suffering we have to face, the good news is that we are not alone. God is *with* us, and God *loves* us, and God *shows* that through the people around us. Let us *be* those people for each other and reveal God's glory to the world.