

Passing Through

Isaiah 43: 1-7 Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22

There is a long line at the airport, or the food stand, or the deli counter, or someplace like that and you need to love through the line, not up the line but across it. You simply want to pass through. You notice that all the faces look pretty grumpy because that's what long lines do to people; it makes them look rather ugly, beset, and testy. Give them a numbered ticket and they relax just a bit, but leave them a long line, and faces turn sour. Seeing this wall of somewhat blank, rather irritated countenances, you look for the one who looks the least mean, or you look for the natural gap where you might pass through. You make some apologies, and cast the remark, "I'm just passing through," and hope for the best.

I vividly remember a night of pouring rain on the Friday of Veterans Day weekend in 1996 in the Washington, DC area, getting stuck for over an hour on the George Washington Parkway on the way to National Airport. The whole family was going to Florida for my interview with the Nominating Committee at the Weirsdale church. At that point, Rachel was 5 and Ray was 11. We were so late getting there that we had totally missed the flight on United. No, they had no more flights with available seating that night or the next day. They sent us to the Delta terminal.

That meant going outside where there was a wall of people, probably 150 or so, completely blocking the sidewalk. I'm weighed down with about 80 pounds of baggage as my wife manages the kids, and the people are pretty much ignoring us. I'm not walking out in the driveway in the rain around this mass of people, so I pass through. It was not pretty.

I bellowed in my best bellowing voice, EXCUSE ME. COMING THROUGH. EXCUSE ME. COMING THROUGH. EXCUSE ME. This parted the crowd generally as I literally waded through them like so much shoulder-high mud. Despite my bellowing, there were people who continued to ignore me and didn't move. I was in such a snit that I kept on going, plowing into and through them, with my wife and the kids, which would have a crying Rachel and whimpering Ray along with my wife following in my wake, with Nancy saying, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry."

I could see that there was one guy who saw me coming and I guess he felt that I was being rude and obnoxious (and I was), and he decided to stand in front of me to block me. There is always one in every crowd. I rammed into him like I rammed into anyone else who stood in my way and he re-positioned himself in front of me. I gave him the 'do you want to die now' face, and he gave me a face back that said 'just try it.' I pushed around him, deciding that the evening had been screwed up enough already. I didn't need to add an arrest for assault to the whole business. All of which is to say, passing through can be a substantial struggle at times.

(By the way, Delta got us booked on a flight out to Orlando the next morning.)

This notion of just passing through is something we actually hear in theological expression. Oh, it's much more dressed up, but the idea is the same. It is that this life, on the whole, is rather meaningless, and that the real life, the true life, only comes after death. We are only here passing through this life to the true life in eternity. The real consequence is that real life problems are rather irrelevant, all products of a lost and sinful existence among lost and sinful people, institutions, and societies. People may need a little help getting by as they pass through this life, but the real focus of faithful life and witness is to get people saved for the next life, for eternity. The problems of this life are simply irrelevant by comparison. It's as if the only job that Christians have in this life is to prepare for the next life.

Yet the entire biblical record tells us that such a viewpoint is totally inaccurate. If this life was such a total waste and without worth of consideration, how is it that God keeps making such a big thing out of what happens in this life?

Most everyone here doesn't share that viewpoint about this life. We do understand that passing through means passing through good times and bad times. About that kind of passing through, the biblical record has plenty to tell us.

Let's consider the prophet Isaiah's words. Prior to these words, Isaiah has been roundly condemning Israel for its blindness and deafness toward the will of God, its faithlessness and unrighteousness. God is recapping the punishment, making sure that Israel understands that it was God's own will that brought about Israel's punishment.

God doesn't want them to think that it was bad strategy by their generals, or the superiority of the enemy army, or that the enemy's gods were stronger, or that their chariots were built with fine German engineering (I'm sure they had Mercedes back then, right?). God wants them to know that none of that stuff mattered. None of it. They were devastated **because God authored it**, and God wants them to know where their punishment came from. If they understand that, then they will then know where their blessing and salvation comes from.

In our reading, we get the nice part of this equation, starting with the words, "But now...." God reminds them that they exist only because God formed and created them. As God affirms the parent's role, God says, *I have called you by name; you are mine*. This is not in a sense of ownership *per se*, like a car, a house, a sheep, or a slave, as we'll see in a moment. The people are God's own as God's precious creation, like children to a father.

Recalling their history together, God offers assurance for the future by saying that God will be with them, regardless of what dire perils they should have to pass through:

*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 I am the Lord your God,*

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

To redeem them from their just punishment, God will ransom Egypt and other distant lands. How does God do this? God owns them. God wants his people to know that God is sovereign over all, even the great empires. As God is in command of Israel's destiny, so God is in command of the destiny of empires as well.

God shows the value of his covenant people to him by saying that the great riches and power of the upper and lower Nile of the Egyptian kingdom would be cashed in simply to bail out Israel, a tiny spec of a nation in the crossroads of the Middle East. God will pay paid dearly in order to call them his own once again.

Why has God done this? God says: *[For] you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.* This matter of a Father's love is what motivates God, the love for his children, represented by Israel.

By the end of the passage, God makes clear on whose behalf God is acting so passionately:

*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.*

God acts with generosity, graciously, passionately to restore the relationship with his children. God acts in love. God will not forget or neglect his children, even though they pass through the fury of the world's scorn and violence.

In the reading from Luke, we hear about the baptism of Jesus after John has explained how he is not the Messiah from God. In the passage from Luke, John's ministry of baptism is described (as in all the gospels) as pointing toward Jesus, and directing attention **away** from any thought that John was the Promised One from God. This is what we see in all of the gospels as John is identified as the forerunner, but not as the Messiah from God.

The important aspect to remember is the act of baptism, a passage through the waters. John has been administering baptism as an act for people to repent of their sinfulness and unrighteousness, and get preserved in their baptism, in their restored status before God as they await the Messiah who brings the end of the age. This is why people are asking John about the Messiah, and why they're speculating that John may be the Promised One.

As John describes the Messiah whose brings a baptism of Holy Spirit and fire, the imagery is connected to Pentecost and to judgment. John wants the faithful, meek and humble – those who **truly** repent of their sinfulness – to be on the right side of divine judgment when it comes. Passing through the waters in baptism serves to set the faithful

in good relationship to God, uniting them to God and God's purpose, and placing them within the family of God's loving care. To gain this, they must genuinely repent and pass through the waters to their new life status.

Interestingly, Luke does not have John baptizing Jesus. Luke is busy talking about how John is **not** Jesus. Then John gets arrested by Herod in the in-between verses. **Then** Jesus is baptized, just one among a group of believers who were being baptized. Jesus was no different, that is, until the Spirit of God descended on Jesus *in bodily form like a dove* (not that it **was** a dove, but rather **like** a dove gently landing on something). As if that wasn't enough, we have a voice from heaven: *You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*

Jesus passes through the waters of baptism, the ritual to awaken and enliven the new creation of God's covenant love for the baptized. Jesus emerges to hear the heavenly declaration on belonging to God, of being Son to the Father. Passing through establishes the new creation of God and with God.

Here again, God has done the inexplicable. For a Son, God has this nobody from Nazareth (or nowhere) who has been baptized as a member of a minor sect within a small religion. There is absolutely nothing noteworthy about this individual, yet this is the one whom the God of creation calls Son. There is no royalty, no wealth, no reputation, no notoriety of any kind. He's just some guy *and* he's the Son of God. It's the natural outcome of the humble origins of this fellow in the birth narrative we heard at Advent and Christmas, only his lot in life hasn't gotten a bit better. If anything, he's even more non-descript.

If we can see a pattern, it is that God doesn't care who you are, how important you are, how big your problems are or aren't, how successful you are, how faithful you are, how righteous you are, or how good looking you are. This wacky, crazy God thinks his people are precious and worthy of his gracious love. And that's us, God's people.

Passing through? Not passing through this life, as a perspective regarding this life with relative indifference. Not at all. Passing through the waters, the fire, the trials, and the tribulations is the passage to the new creation that God is forming in you.

Who knows what this year will bring? It should come as no surprise that turbulence may well rock your boat, pushing your faith in new directions. We should remember that it has been in such times that God draws the blessed and faithful people of his covenant closer, giving them a new vision, making them a new creation. That's the kind of passage through that may not be too pleasant, but we enter those troubled seasons knowing God's promise to be with us, and to make us new through it all.