

Baptized Into Trouble
Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-22
Lewinsville Presbyterian Church
January 12, 2025

Let us pray: Your love surrounds us all the time, Lord. We are never separated from your love for us in Jesus Christ. Teach our hearts to believe this, teach our hearts to trust this, and teach our hearts to be willing to let go of everything else, so that we can follow you wherever you are leading us. In your name we pray, Amen.

One of the mysteries of faith is that many of us want faith to *protect us from trouble*, to be something like a magic shield or protective bubble that will function to keep bad things out of our lives. We can think that if we just pray enough, or pray the right way; if we read the Bible enough, or memorize enough verses; if we attend enough worship services, or give enough money, or do enough good deeds, that God will then reward us for that by keeping bad things away from us. That we can somehow use our faith to keep trouble out of our lives.

This thinking helps to create a market for books like *Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People?* It leads us to ask questions like, Why is this happening to me, Lord? Why is this piece of suffering coming to me? What have I done, or not done, to deserve this? It can feel like either the Lord has betrayed us, or that we have somehow done something wrong. Because we want to believe that faith, properly practiced, will protect us from trouble.

But our texts this morning, and the life of Jesus generally, teach us that in fact we are *baptized into trouble*, rather than being baptized out of trouble. When we are baptized into Christ Jesus, we often say at funeral services, we are baptized into his death. We die with Christ in our baptisms, we die to all of the things that the world says will keep us safe, because whenever we cling to those things – whether it be money that’s going to keep us safe, or popularity or approval that’s going to keep us safe, or weapons and guns and

bombs and security gates that are going to keep us safe, whenever we cling to anything that the world says will keep us safe, we place our trust in that thing, which means turn that we are at risk of turning that thing into an idol and giving our heart to it.

In our baptisms, we die with Christ to those things, and then we rise with Christ to the freedom of faith, to the generosity of faith, and to the courageous joy of faith, rather than the anxious clinging to our possessions in the world. The rising always follows the dying.

We are not baptized out of trouble, we are baptized into trouble. And there are a couple of different dimensions to this. Turn with me to Isaiah 43. This is a text worth learning by heart, to get it inside of you, verses 1-3 in particular are verses to memorize. Say verses 1-3 along with me: “But now, thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel; Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 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.”

You can type those words out and put your name in verse 1 for Jacob and Israel, so that it reads, “Thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Paul; he who formed you, O Mary. Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Put your name in there, and let it be a word from the Lord directly to you. These words in these verses have gotten me through hard times before, and they can do the same for you.

The translation of Isaiah 43 assumes that there *are going* to be times when you will go through raging waters, there will be circumstances when you will go through a

scorching fire. There will be times when we all must face trouble of one kind or another. And the promise of our faith is that though those circumstances can be very, very hard, they do not define you. They may scar you, but they will not dominate you. And they cannot destroy you, because the Lord has called you personally by name, and you belong to him. You are baptized into the troubles of your life, which means that your baptism goes with you into all the troubles of your life, and the Lord will accompany you and guide you and bring you through them all. You are baptized into trouble.

A 2nd dimension of this is that there are moments when it is our baptized faith itself that leads us into trouble. It is because we have died with Christ to the priorities and the things of this world that we may feel summoned and authorized to take a stand, or to take our place with people who are unpopular, in ways that may get us into trouble with the systems of this world.

Will Willimon was the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University in the 80s and 90s, and he tells a somewhat famous story of getting an angry phone call from the parent of a Duke student.

“I hold you personally responsible for this,” the father told him.

“Me?” Willimon asked.

“Yes, you. I send my daughter off to college to get a good education. Now she tells me she wants to throw it all away, and go off to Haiti as a Presbyterian mission volunteer! Isn’t that absurd? A degree in mechanical engineering from Duke, and she’s going off to dig ditches in Haiti.”

“Well,” said Willimon, in a feeble attempt at humor, trying to break the ice, “I doubt the engineering department taught her much about that line of work, but she’s a fast learner; she’ll probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months.”

“Look,” interrupted the father, “this is no laughing matter. I hold you completely responsible for her decision. She likes you. You’ve filled her head with all those pie-in-the-sky ideas!”

“Now look,” said Willimon, “Weren’t you the one who had her baptized?”

“Why yes,” the father replied.

“And didn’t you read her Bible stories, take her to Sunday school, send her off to Montreat with the Youth Group?”

“Well yes, but....”

“Then don’t ‘but’ me. It’s your fault she believed all that stuff, that she’s gone and thrown it all away on Jesus—not mine. You’re the one who introduced her to Jesus, not me.”

“But all we ever wanted was for her to be a Presbyterian,” the father said meekly.

“Sorry, my friend,” Willimon said. “Looks like you made a disciple.”

John the Baptist, who baptized Jesus, spoke honestly and courageously to King Herod Antipas in our reading from Luke, spoke to him about the wrongness of him marrying his brother’s wife. John’s faith led him to do this. But powerful kings do not like being challenged like that, and so John was put in prison and later executed. John’s faith got him into trouble. Jesus himself represented a threat to the religious establishment and the political establishment because his freedom came from God and not from conforming to their rules. So the system executed him, as well.

Our faith may not lead us to dramatic confrontations like John the Baptist or Jesus, but there will be smaller, but no less challenging, moments for us – at work, or in our neighborhood or community, or in our families, where living out our baptisms, following Jesus in freedom and love and joy, will lead us to say or do or embody things that get us into a kind of holy trouble.

Christian faith is not about being protected from trouble or being magically shielded from trouble. When we fall into thinking that trouble should not ever come to us, we will live our days with brittle anxiety, always looking over our shoulders, and needing everything to go the way we want. Faith in Christ, however, offers us the deep, sustaining, refreshing assurance that Christ is with us in each and every circumstance, and that no circumstance of our lives, no trouble that may come to us, nothing will cut us off, separate us, and isolate us from the loving presence of Jesus Christ. We are baptized into the troubles of our lives, and our baptisms go with us everywhere we go. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Fill our hearts with your grace, with your strength, and with your love, Lord. Let your baptism penetrate our lives, baptize us not just with water but with your fire and your Spirit, from the inside out, so that your life takes root in us and grows into the full expression of your love. Through Christ we pray, Amen.