

Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 7, 2019

Text: Isaiah 43:16-21

Theme: "Waters and Rivers"

Rivers we know, water we do not use much in the plural. In the Old Testament waters usually (maybe always) means a lot of water, often dangerous water. A river can be a place of many waters, certainly the sea. Yes, we know water can be dangerous. I understand most fatalities from storms come from the water. There has been much flooding this spring. We have had heavy amounts of melting snowfall from the northern region coupling with a lot of rainfall. This makes for many waters. We have grown familiar with the sage advice, "turn around and don't drown." The flip side is "drive ahead and be dead."

Rivers and waters can be obstacles and they can bring death. So it was before Israel, but God made a way. But rivers and waters can also be a way, a way to bring new life. God can do such things. God does such things. He reminds Israel and He reminds us today in our text.

Israel knew about too much water. That certainly was the reality when they came out of Egypt. The Egyptians chariots were coming up from behind and they were up against the water, the waters of the Red Sea. So they cry out, at least some of them, "Is it because there were not graves enough in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (Exodus 14:11) They couldn't go across. There wasn't time to go around to the north. And they probably were not much on swimming, no, too much water. How hopeless would that be? There weren't even a bunch of these lying around (plank), so they could grab one and begin bob bob bobbing along.

But not so long after that there would be too little water. No long after the miracle of bread from heaven, one that would continue for 40 years, they were faced with no water. Now the crying was, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (Exodus 17:2) But this also was not the end of their water problems. When they get to the end of the destination, then too much water again. It was time to take possession of the land, the first phase of that being Jericho. But between them and Jericho flowed the Jordan River. And we read, “Now the Jordan overflows all its banks throughout the time of harvest.” (Joshua 3:15) Waters and rivers were a problem.

We know a few plank times in life, times of rivers and waters. Life is good, rather pleasant, and suddenly the waters, like a flashflood. Something major breaks loose and you think you may be washed away. It could be an accident, an illness, loss of income, maybe death of a loved one. It is as though your life is being swept away, at least you have been caught up and you are like someone just hanging on to this random plank. But maybe the water problem is not that big. It’s more like a drip or a trickle, but that can be annoying and distracting and maybe a little painful. Of course those drips and trickles can combine to bring flooding into a compartment or two of your life.

Now it could be that water problem is that of two little. It appears the income stream is drying up, maybe the pool of talent for getting the job done, and success somehow has disappeared below the surface. We think, “Now, God what are you up to? Why does it have to be this way? It is so hard!” Perhaps the stream of faith seems to be becoming less as though someone is shutting off the spigot.

Yet there may be more water problems, again too many waters, now the waters, the tossing and churning waters of temptation. Those waves of temptation came crashing in,

rolling over us, threaten to sweep us away. God's warning is, "Turn around and don't drown." But the devil says, "Come on ahead. It's not like God said."

Rivers and waters can be problems. Too much, we're just hanging on to whatever happens to float by, or too little and we are parched for strength. But God acts, God delivers, God provides. He describes Himself in our text as the One "who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters (v. 16)." He delivers. Moses said to Israel there by the Red Sea, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD." (Exodus 14:13) And they did. Those deadly waters just divided before them and there was the way all along. They just couldn't see it before because it was covered in water. Years later when they came to the Jordan there was the way across of dry land. As soon as the priests carrying the Ark stepped into the river the waters just heaped up and there was the way.

Too much water was not a problem for God, actually the water would be solution to destroy the would-be destroyers, "Who brings forth chariot, and horse, army and warrior (v. 17)." God was the One calling the shots even when the chariot, and horse, army and warrior meant to harm His people. "They lie down, they cannot rise." (v. 17) The waters were like the final plank in ark of deliverance for Israel and of the coffin for the Egyptians.

God brings all this to remembrance and then He says, 'Forget about it!' "Remember not the former things." (v. 18) It is not as though the former things would be wiped from their memory banks. They would be overshadowed by a much bigger, worldwide, even final things. "I am doing a new thing; now it springs (sprouts) forth." (v. 19) The sprout is emerging from which would grow the tree of salvation. But it will get worse before it gets better. Judah had been delivered from the Assyrians, but she would not be delivered from the Babylonians. More waters of death and destruction were coming.

The Babylonians would flow into the land and some of Judah would die, and some would be scattered, and some would be carried away into exile in Babylon. They will be there for a while, time to settle down and build houses. There Daniel would become an old man. But the Babylon power was limited. They would later be conquered by the Medes and the Persians. It looked like there was no way back, back to the land promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But God would make a way. In the first year of his reign, Cyrus King of Persia, issues an order, “The LORD, the God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem...Whoever is among you of all His people, may the LORD his God be with him. Let him go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:23) It is the return spoken of by Isaiah and Jeremiah.

It was a great deliverance, this way back. But the people were looking for, and rightly so, something greater. The reality before them was falling short of what they envisioned fulfillment would be. There must be more! They were right.

There was one coming to deliver who was the Commander of the waters, even the Creator of the waters. He was there in the beginning when the Spirit was hovering over the waters of the deep, there when the fountains of the deep burst open and the skies opened up for the waters to cover all the earth. He was there with Israel when the waters of the Nile were turned to blood, when the waters of the Red Sea were pushed back and when the flood waters of the Nile stacked up in a heap. He was there when water came forth from the rock to supply Israel two times in the wilderness. Actually Paul says, “That Rock that followed was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:4)

This is the One who takes on our human flesh and dwells among us. He changes the water into wine. He walks on the waters of the Sea of Galilee. He rebukes the wind that was stirring up those waters. He is the One who tells the woman at the well that if she

really knew who He was she would have asked and He would have given her living water, water becoming a spring that wells up to salvation. (John 4:10-14)

This One not only makes a way, He is the way through sin, death, and the devil. He came fulfilling all righteousness never succumbing to the devil's temptations. He came to be the Christ of the law and the prophets, not the Christ of false expectations and misunderstandings. He will be lifted up on a cross there to do what, to draw all people unto Himself. (John 12:32) He drinks the cup of bitter judgment. He goes under the waters, the waves, of God's justice against our sin. For Him it is the wormwood and the gall so we may have the water of life.

The One lifted up is the One dead and buried, but then the One raised up and ascended up to the Father's right hand. He is raised to life to give life. And He has and He does. In Him is deliverance. He is not some random plank floating by that may buy us some time, no, we have been picked up, plucked out of the waters of death and given refuge in the ark of the church.

Now instead of the waters that destroy we drink of the waters that quench and sustain. We drink down the waters of forgiveness for our thirsty spirits. He sends waters to overwhelm the desert, not to sweep away in death, but to bring life. "For I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people." (v. 20) But it extends beyond the chosen from Israel of the flesh. It's bigger than that. "Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. ⁶ I will say to the north, give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth." (Isaiah 43:5,6)

We drink in the water of life of the Gospel. "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow

rivers of living water.” (John 7:38) In our text we read, “[Water to give] drink to my chosen people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.” (v. 21) “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9) We have experienced not the waters that kill, but the waters of the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

We are given life, water, nourished, sustained to be fruitful for our Lord. We may work for a lot of things, even accomplish a lot of things, have quite the house of success. But Paul says it’s all rubbish compared to knowing Christ and to be found in Him having a righteousness not from the law, but through faith (Philippians 4:8-9). If the house is not built on Christ, only a foundation of sand and the rains come, then the surprise that it’s not much of a prize. It is soon reduced to so many bobbing planks.

Rivers and waters, a problem. But God provides the way. God is the way. He waters our thirsting souls with the Gospel and we are given life. Without Him we are dried up and washed away. We drink in God’s promises. We are founded on our Lord Jesus. We have been lifted up by Him to bear fruit in His service. For Jesus’ sake. Amen