

When Waters Rise  
Isaiah 43.1-7  
August 28, 2016  
Pentecost +15C  
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott  
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

I don't watch dramas. I haven't seen *Breaking Bad*, and I'll never be able to discuss *Game of Thrones* with you. I tried *House of Cards* and couldn't make it past the first episode. I did briefly fall for Don Draper's magic but gave up on *Mad Men* when it all became too dark. I chase light. I want laughter. I love the first 20 minutes of *The Tonight Show* and will give most any stand-up comic a chance. I faithfully commit to sitcoms that are tanking and have no chance of being picked up for a second season. The movie I most wanted to see this summer was *Nine Lives*—a family movie about a distracted business man who gets turned into his family's cat. I love it. I love belly laughs and the cozy rest of knowing this is only going to be good. This is only going to be happy. I am only going to feel my own lightness before I drift off to sleep.

Some of this is because I have always been wired to sense both light and dark. In my childhood home and in the world at large, I could sense in my gut when things weren't right. I have long been tapped into the pulse of brokenness that steadily beats beneath so many surfaces. It is an act of self-care that I don't allow myself to get pulled into fictional drama, and I do so knowing how I am wired to grab the energy of emotions around me. Curiously, that is part of what draws me to the work of parish ministry. I am sensitive the highs and lows in people's lives, too. But that sensitivity in me isn't to be squandered on entertainment, it's part of my heartbeat for ministry and connecting to the suffering of people's lives. I am wired for empathy at almost a cellular level.

Suffering. We don't want to suffer. We don't want to face our darkness or dwell too long on a life that appears to be falling apart. That's where the prophet Isaiah sits today. He is speaking to people who have suffered greatly. They have no more tears to cry. They have been forced from their homes, driven to a neighboring land, wrestled with the question, "Where is God when we suffer?" and decided the answer is somewhere between "God is nowhere" to "God is angry." Either way, the answer isn't a satisfying one. Exile is a reality and a theme in scripture that speaks to the darkest of suffering, and prophets spoke into that reality with differing words of when God would be found and when God would find God's people. Today's word speaks to the heart of suffering with the words we most long to hear—I see you. I hear you. I love you. It's going to be okay. I promise. I'm right here.

Artist Jan Richardson recently marked the third anniversary of the unexpected death of her husband. They knew brain surgery to address an aneurysm came with significant risks, but they still held onto hope that all would go as doctors hoped. Instead, she said goodbye decades before she ever anticipated such a moment. As she reflected on her grief recently, she shared this poem entitled *Blessing for Falling into a New Layer of Grief*:

You thought  
you had hit  
every layer possible,  
that you had found  
the far limit  
of your sorrow,  
of your grief.  
Now the world falls  
from beneath your feet  
all over again,  
as if the wound  
were opening  
for the first time,  
only now with  
an ache you recognize  
as ancient.  
Here is the time  
for kindness—  
your own, to yourself—  
as you fall  
and fall,  
as you land hard  
in this layer  
that lies deeper than  
you ever imagined  
you could go.  
Think of it as  
a secret room—  
this space  
that has opened  
before you,  
that has opened  
inside you,

though it may look  
sharp in every corner  
and sinister  
no matter where  
you turn.  
Think of it as  
a hidden chamber  
in your heart  
where you can stay  
as long as you need,  
where you will  
find provision  
you never wanted  
but on which  
your life will now  
depend.  
I want to tell you  
there is treasure  
even here—  
that the sharp lines  
that so match your scars  
will lead  
to solace;  
that this space  
that feels so foreign  
will become for you  
a shelter.  
So let yourself fall.  
It will not be  
the last time,  
but do not let this be  
cause for fear.  
These are the rooms  
around which your  
new home will grow—  
the home of your heart,  
the home of your life  
that welcomes you  
with such completeness,  
opening and

opening and  
opening itself to you,  
no part of you  
turned away.

I am sensitive to the realities of suffering right now as we are in daily conversation with friends in South Louisiana—no flood insurance, estimates for rebuilding that are tens of thousands above what FEMA might possibly pay, the piles of debris along every road. On this 11th late August weekend after post-Katrina flooding, I am sensitive to how those stories are still in you and just beneath the surface; a room within your heart around which your new home has grown. When we speak of the world's present trauma—Syria and Turkey and Italy—there is something in seeing the pain that exists in our world that holds a mirror up to our own. And sometimes that pain feels like a loss of self. The world of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah is clear: You are not your suffering. You are not your pain. I have called you by name. You are mine. When the waters rise, that's when God reminds you of your name. "I have named you. I know who you are," says the Lord.

The world into which Isaiah is speaking is more like the refugee crisis we have witnessed from Syria than even the tremendous loss we are witnessing now an hour away. As we approach the biblical text, it is important that we acknowledge literal exile and emotional, metaphorical exile. Sometimes we truly know and experience both in our lives, and sometimes only one. If we are talking national powers, then we collectively are more Babylon than Judah in this story. And yet, as Patricia Tull notes, "The new experiences of exile that we face are both widespread and personal. Into this despair comes a preposterous word -- neither fire nor flood will separate exiles from God and God's saving acts of grace. The passage doesn't promise there won't be fire and flood, but rather that they will not be faced alone, and they will not overpower the faithful."<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah's word was written into the lives of people who had suffered greatly, lost everything, including their concept of God, and didn't know what was coming next. Maybe that's not you and your life. Maybe your suffering doesn't look like that, and you start to play the well-intentioned game of comparing your life to theirs or hers or his. It's the "well, at least I'm not" game, and you mean to give yourself some perspective and push your feelings down. I may hate my job, but at least I'm not out of work. I may be terrified of test results, but at least I'm not uninsured. I may be...but at least I'm not...

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1550](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1550)

Perspective is good, and creating distance from our emotions can be a smart, healthy practice to cultivate. But just for a moment, set aside other people's stories. Let your life be its own story. Let the suffering you know sit in front of you without all of that "at least I'm not" self-judgment. Hear the prophet speaking to you right now. You have passed through the fire. You have crossed through the waters. You have suffered. You are suffering. But this part of the story is not all there is. This part of your story is not the whole of who you are. You are not your suffering. You have a name that is your truest, best self. The prophet tells us that God has named us, God has called you by name, God is near. Even in your suffering, no matter now grand or how minor it may seem, God is near to you as your breath. You have suffered greatly, but now...

When you pass through the fires, I will be with you  
When you pass through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you  
When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned  
the flame [of your suffering] shall not consume you  
For I am the Lord your God, you are precious in my sight,  
you are honored, and I love you.

We know the spectrum of suffering and its dis-ease: pain, monotony, loneliness, invisibility, responsibility, boredom, disappointment. And the antidote to this dis-ease is almost always some form of community and friendship: it's the "me, too," and I see you, I hear you, I am with you; it's the arrival of someone to sit alongside you until you're ready for that someone to walk alongside you until you are ready to return to your life most fully with these someones alongside you.

Judah needed the prophet to speak to them of God's naming. We need each other to speak that same comfort and truth. When the waters rise, we need to speak to each other from the "me, too" of our experience. We need to remind each other of the rooms around which your new home will grow. We need the blessing that the great saint and prophet and poet John O'Donohue offers to each of us in our own pain:

May you be blessed in the holy names of those  
Who, without you knowing it,  
Help to carry and lighten your pain.  
May you know serenity  
When you are called  
To enter the house of suffering.  
May a window of light always surprise you.  
May you be granted the wisdom  
To avoid false resistance;

When suffering knocks on the door of your life,  
May you glimpse its eventual gifts.  
May you be able to receive the fruits of suffering.  
May memory bless and protect you  
With the hard-earned light of past travail;  
To remind you that you have survived before  
And though the darkness now is deep,  
You will soon see the approaching light.  
May the grace of time heal your wounds.  
may you know that though the storm might rage,  
Not a hair of your head will be harmed.

I am the Lord your God, you are precious in my sight,  
you are honored, and I love you.  
I have called you by name. You are mine.

My brothers and sisters, may you know this truth and feel it wash over you again and  
again and again and again. Amen.