

Isaiah 43:1-3a

It's not if, it's when. "If you do this," leaves room for doubt. "When you do this," speaks of certainty. And the latter is the manner in which God speaks. Not, "If you pass through the waters..." but "*when.*" Not, "If you walk through fire..." but "*when.*"

God's people are not to wonder if they will face such ordeals and struggles. They are to look for these to come in life. Every branch that bears fruit is pruned, says Jesus. "Every branch." Not to stunt the growth, but that it may bear more fruit.

It all begins in your baptism. For this is where it began for Jesus. After He was baptized in the Jordan River, Jesus passed through one raging river after another. He walked through fire upon fire. And He did this until His death on a cross.

You are not baptized into the world. You are baptized into Christ. His life, death, and resurrection, therefore, is the shape yours now takes. You cannot be united to Christ in baptism and steer clear of the raging waters and burning fires. Through these you and I must walk, for so did our Lord.

But fear not. "*When you pass through the waters,*" says God through His prophet, "*I will be with you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned...for I am the Lord your God.*"

God gives us many comforting stories of His people in the Old Testament that we may learn from them and be cheered, especially when life is difficult. God brought His people to the shore of the Red Sea, and later to the bank of the Jordan. There was no avoiding it. They had to pass through the waters.

But did they? Look at a map and you'll see that Israel could easily have avoided the Red Sea. They could have walked on dry land straight out of Egypt, taking the broad path north of the Red Sea. This is the route everyone traveled. No one left Egypt, or entered Egypt, by crossing the Red Sea...unless on a boat. The caravans to and from Egypt always took the land route between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.

The same is true of the Jordan River. People could easily enter into Canaan by going around the river instead of through it. Both Abraham and Jacob traveled from Canaan down to Egypt without passing through any water. But four centuries later God leads their descendants, not around the waters, but through them.

"If you pass through the waters? If you walk through fire?" No way. It's not if, but when. God does not lead us in life on the easiest path, for that would destroy us. We would wander away from Him. We would become straying sheep. An easy life is what Satan wants for his followers. He leads on the broad path around the Red Sea, not through it. But the broad path, says Jesus, is the path that leads to destruction.

When you and I pass through trial after trial, we need to get down on our knees and thank God. For through these trials He is the one who is leading us. And through these trials He promises to be with us. And when we see our congregation passing through trial and turmoil, we should thank God. For a congregation that is led along an easy path will fall away from the Gospel.

Did you ever stop to consider that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were not preserved from the fiery furnace? They were preserved in the midst of the furnace. God did not lead them around the fire on an easy path. He led them into the fire. But He was in the fire with them. And He did not allow the fire to burn them. He did the same thing with Daniel. He led him into the lion's den, not around it. But in the lion's den God was with Daniel closing the lion's mouths.

Why would we think that God will lead us around trials today when we see His people being led through trials in the stories He gives us? No one ever becomes stronger by avoiding a trial. We learn to trust in the Lord only as He leads us through the waters and through the fires.

And through these we are given our identity. God claimed Israel for His own people. Passing through the Red Sea they were now the people He redeemed. This was their baptism writes St. Paul. Had they gone around the water, they would not have been God's people. It was through the water that they became a possession of God.

And also with us. God brings us out of Satan's bondage to be His own possession by leading us into the water of baptism. The world chooses the path around this water. They choose the broad, dry path avoiding the Red Sea. But that path is not blessed by God, for His promise is attached to the water.

Jesus blessed this water for us. In His baptism He entered into the Red Sea to part those waters for us. He entered into the Jordan so that we are led out of the wilderness of this life into the Promised Land. And Jesus entered into the fires for us. He did not avoid the fire. He walked the path to the cross where the fire of hell consumed Him. He was punished by the fire of God's wrath for He was the sin-bearer. But now the path through every fire in life is safe for you. The fire cannot consume you for your sins are forgiven. There is no punishment of God for you to bear. Jesus endured it all for you.

As God leads us through life..one river after another; one fire upon another...it is enough to know that He is with us. Yet He gives us comfort also in this: we are with each other. Israel passed through the Red Sea together. This is how God leads us. We are a church family; a congregation of precious souls for whom Christ died. It's not just you and God; it's God with us. When one of us is struggling in life, the rest of us can come together and struggle with him or her. When one of us is passing through a fiery trial, the rest of us are able to join with that precious child of God and walk through the fire with him or her.

And one in our church family is going through the fire right now. Ashley's trial began last Monday; although four years now she has been enduring a painful trial. She needs you, her church family, to walk with her; to stand by her; to pray to God that the truth sets her free. She has been praying for you these four years. She needs your prayers now. She needs your love.

It's what we can give for her and for all of us. We walk together in life. We do pass through water and fire, and it's scary. But the Lord Jesus is with us. He will keep His promise: *"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."* Amen.