

The Baptism of Our Lord
January 9-10, 2010
Isaiah 43: 1-3

“Do Not Fear”

As we begin this new year, we may do so with some fear. Spoken or unspoken, many of us carry around with us what the ancient Greeks called *phobos* – the origin of our word, “phobia,” or fear. Perhaps it is job-related, wondering whether in this economy our position at work will remain intact in the year ahead, and how we’ll make ends meet. Perhaps that fear is health-related as we grapple with illness – maybe chronic, even terminal illness – for ourselves or a loved one. Perhaps it is school-related, struggling to do our best with classes but fearful of making the grade we’d like. Our fear may revolve around relationships; perhaps our marriage is not doing well and we need help. Maybe there’s a fractured relationship with a friend, co-worker, or neighbor that’s on our mind. Fear takes many forms, and it robs us of the joy of living – that full and abundant life that Jesus came to bring (John 10:10). During the Advent and Christmas seasons, that thing called fear cropped up a number of times: Mary’s fear at the angel’s message to her, Joseph’s fear to take Mary as his wife after he learned that she was pregnant, the shepherd’s fear at the angel’s announcement of Jesus’ birth. In each of these instances, the response of God through his angel messenger was always the same: “Do not fear.” Today as we celebrate Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan River, that same message comes to us in the Old Testament lesson (Isaiah 43:1-7), and this becomes the theme for today’s message, “Do Not Fear.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

The Word of God through Isaiah was recorded some 750 years before Jesus. God’s people were struggling with a lot of fear in their lives. When Jerusalem fell to the mighty Babylonian army in 587 B.C., Zedekiah, a descendent of David, was king – and he was the last one. He was made to watch the killing of his sons, and then he himself was blinded. David’s line on the throne of Israel had ended after nearly 400 years. The center of worship, Solomon’s beautiful temple in Jerusalem, was destroyed, and Jerusalem itself was reduced to rubble. The land promised by God to Abraham and his descendants was now under foreign control. God’s people faced a crisis of faith: had the Lord God been defeated by the god of Babylon? Was God really in control of things? God’s people also faced an identity crisis: who were they now? Now that their land, city, and temple were destroyed, could they even be the people of the Lord in a strange and foreign land? It’s hard to overstate the deep-seated fear that God’s people were dealing with.

Isaiah’s words to his displaced countrymen came near the end of their exile in Babylon. He shares with them that God promises to bring his people home, and restore them. Not once, but twice in these verses God says through Isaiah: **“Do not fear”** (Isaiah 43:1, 5). God is calling his worried and fearful people to remember how he rescued their ancestors: **“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; and the flame shall not consume you”** (Isaiah 43:2). God brought them out of slavery, and by God’s almighty power they crossed on dry ground through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River into the promised land. When God led them by the pillar of fire through the wilderness, they were not burned or consumed by that fire. God is calling his people to remember his power to help in time of need so that fear gives way to trust. God will deliver his people from Babylon just as he delivered them from Egypt. “Do not fear,” says the Lord.

Fear is a crippling force that causes all kinds of problems: we don’t think clearly and our judgment becomes shaky. Fear brings with it all sorts of negative physiological and emotional reactions. Fear also undermines faith and trust in God. When Jesus was baptized by John in the

Jordan River, his public life and ministry began. There at flowing waters of the Jordan, the triune God is made manifest: the Father's voice identifying Jesus: **"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"** (Luke 3:22); the Son of God, Jesus, the Word-made-flesh; and the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove. With his baptism, Jesus is launched into a ministry of preaching and teaching, of healing and miracle-working, that would culminate in his death and resurrection. In his humanity, was Jesus fearful of what was before him? Scripture does not record this, but what is recorded is that Jesus as the new Israel, the new Son of God, who would fulfill all righteousness in our behalf. Like Israel of old, Jesus passed through the waters of the Jordan River. His baptism by John takes place in the same location where God's people of old passed through the Jordan to enter into the promised land. Unlike Israel of old, Jesus would live that perfect and God-pleasing life that Israel could not – and that we cannot. When we are baptized, we are baptized into all that Jesus Christ has done for us – through his perfect and sinless life, through his innocent suffering and death, through his triumph over sin, death, and the devil. When we are baptized, we are joined to Christ and become one with him. His saving work, his righteousness, becomes our own. If God would do all this for us, providing his only Son to suffer, die, and rise again for us, what have we to fear?

The things that we struggle with in this life – job, health, school, relationships – the Lord promises that he himself will walk through all of this with us. It doesn't mean that all of these things will magically disappear or go away; the Lord is not a magician. As we face these things, the word of the Lord to us is the same word to his people of old: **"Do not fear."** When we feel overwhelmed and the waters of adversity seem to be rising higher and higher, the Lord tells us: **"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you"** (Isaiah 43:2). When we feel eaten up and burned out, the Lord tells us: **"When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you"** (Isaiah 43:2). Why? Why would God say this? Why would God do this? **"For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior"** (Isaiah 43:3). There in the waters of the Jordan River we see our Savior, and we can only say, "Thanks be to God." Amen.