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Last month I had the joy of baptizing four youth after spending several weeks with them in Bible study, prayer, and conversation about baptism. When it came time for each youth to make a decision, a few were hesitant, indicating they weren't sure whether they wanted to get baptized. As we talked more about their reluctance, I heard some express the same concerns often voiced when I prepare a group for baptism: the fear of getting dunked under the water.

Through the years I've heard youth and adults share their memories of fearful experiences of the water: taking swimming lessons and going under the water, jumping into the deep end of the pool by mistake and sinking to the bottom, wandering too close to a lake and falling in. Sometimes it's only moments until someone discovers the situation and rescues them from the water, but the delay can seem like forever as one feels cut off from air. It's a scary feeling, and those experiences can affect one's readiness for immersion into the waters of baptism.

The prophet Isaiah seemed aware of similar fears of the water as he spoke about the history of God's

people living in the land of Israel thousands of years ago. They were living in a challenging time, filled with invasions into their land by other nations. It was a scary time. The prophet used the imagery of passing through the waters, reminding them that the rivers of scary times would not overwhelm them.

You may have noticed that water is a common theme throughout the Bible, from the separation of water and earth at the beginning in Genesis, to the survival and Noah and pairs of animals from a huge flood by boarding a giant boat, to Moses helping God's people escape the slavery of the Pharaoh and crossing the sea, to Joshua leading God's people across a river to a new land.

Water in the Bible seemed to imply a transition, going from one place to another, with something new created along the way. Part of the process, however, involved uncertainty, risk, and even some chaos. Going through the waters was not always a pleasant thing to do, so it's not surprising that passing through the waters invoked fear.

The prophet told his listeners that even in the midst of fear, that they didn't have to pass through

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those waters alone. He began by reminding them that God had created them, had redeemed them. That's a strange word, isn't it? *Redeemed*? We often hear this word used when turning in a coupon to get something. You redeem a coupon to get a discount or special price on purchasing an item, but that definition doesn't make sense here. God didn't ask us for a coupon in order to be with us through the waters. Another translation says, "I have rescued you" (CEV), and that word makes more sense. When trapped by fear or oppression, we long to be rescued.

Through Isaiah, God spoke loving words to the people: "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." Imagine saying those words to someone you love: *I'm here for you, no matter what comes into our lives*. Imagine someone saying those words to you. How might you feel saying or hearing those words? *I'll be with you, no matter what*.

That's God promise to us, and baptism reminds us of that promise. When we enter the waters of

baptism, some may feel afraid of having their head dunked under the water, but that's the point. It's supposed to feel like that, a bit scary. Letting go and trusting me to dunk you under the water can be frightening, but I always promise the person I'm baptizing that I've never dropped anyone in 30-some years of ministry, which has included somewhere between 40 and 50 youth and adults that I've baptized. God's promise to be with us is even better than my promise. We humans make mistakes, forget, get distracted, but God always remembers the promises made. Baptism reminds us of God's promise to always be with us and of God's eternal love.

Children watching a baptism may not completely understand what's happening, as was the case with a girl who watched someone getting dunked in the water in her grandma's church. She heard the pastor proclaim, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost."

When she got home, she excitedly told Mom all about it. "It was neat, Mom. Grandma's church has a swimming pool in it, right behind the

choir. The preacher got in there with some other guy. He grabbed this guy by the nose, pushed him under the water, and yelled, ‘In the name of the Father, and the Son, in the hole you go!’”<sup>1</sup>

Even after our baptisms, we may find ourselves feeling as though we have fallen into a hole, feeling as though the waters of life are rising around us, surrounding us with chaos, filling us with fear. Even if you are baptized, you have probably discovered that you are not exempt from struggles and tough times. The waters of baptism don’t promise to make our lives easier, for we will still face chaos and uncertainty. Baptism reminds us that we aren’t alone, that God remains with us, even if we feel we’re in a hole of gloom with the waters of sin rising around us. God is still there.

In addition to God’s presence with us, we also know that the church is with us, as was the case with a

woman who was living through the aching pain of bereavement. She kept coming to church during her time of grief, but she would just stand there with the hymnal in her hands, not singing.

A good friend noticed this and said, “I see you’re not singing, and I also know how much you love to sing. Why don’t you just try to join in? It’ll make you feel better.”

“I’m sorry,” said the bereaved woman, “but I just can’t sing right now. I’m sure I will, eventually. But for now, I know the church is singing the hymns for me, and that’s a great source of comfort.”<sup>2</sup>

May you also trust that the church is with you, singing the songs of joy even in these difficult and uncertain times, even if you don’t feel like singing yourself, the church sings for you, and God will continue to pass through the waters with you.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodgins, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #64.

<sup>2</sup> Homiletics Online, January 9, 2022.