

SERMON/MESSAGE: "Through the Waters"

First United Church, Waterloo -- Baptism of Jesus Sunday, January 9, 2022

PRAYER: "You are with us, O God, when we are buoyant and the circumstances and situations in our lives are like smooth sailing. You are with us, O God, when we are distressed, downcast, or fretful as if we are sailing through troubled waters. We have your Word on it. Thank you."

We can identify with those Hebrews in ancient Israel
who were experiencing the dislocation and trauma of Exile, can't we?
Most of them were physically taken away from home into captivity in a foreign land.
The rest were left to try to eke out a living in a ravaged homeland.
Frustration, fretfulness, despair, times of feeling helpless,
times of taking out anger on their leaders, or one another, or themselves.
And prolonged grief and trauma.
Even before Covid-19 began eating its way into the fabric of our daily lives,
this congregation was already becoming a ship beginning to founder on troubled waters.
And, as often happens, things get worse before they get better.
Other congregations have been suffering similarly. Some have succumbed and shut down.
Dwindling memberships and dwindling financial resources to sustain ministry and mission
has been the norm for a while. We call it attrition. Some manage to stave it off.
Some edge closer and closer to a breaking point. That seems to be where First United is now.
Code Orange. Condition serious. And it is right that everyone of us should be concerned.
And prayerful. And ... dedicated to becoming part of the solution and restoration of health.
Which also means letting go of all forms of finger-pointing and blaming, or scapegoating,
or otherwise stirring the pot.
We share losses and failures together. We share joys and achievements together.
And we can create a hopeful and focused future together by expanding our horizons,
forming and developing partnerships, and discerning together how the Spirit of God
is calling us there. Many other congregations have done that. First United can too.
Even in their days of sensed abandonment, grief, and dislocation,
God did not abandon Hebrew people in their days of Exile.
God would rekindle their faith and draw forth from within them the gift of resilience.
God would become active in creating passage back home,
active in their restoration and renewal as a community of faith.
When they were at their most despairing, when they had reaching their breaking point
God sent a Word of promise on which God would make good:
*"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.... Fear not, I am with you."*
Troubled times, fretful times come to everyone, every community, nation, congregation.
People of faith have a backup resource, a God who can carry them through.

Martin Luther, the Reformer, was often troubled and despairing. Whenever those moments showed up, he would break into chant reminding himself, reassuring himself, “I am baptized!” He didn’t see it as a protection from trouble or distress. He saw it as a source of willpower and God’s support to endure and pass through them.

At the height of the struggle to extricate South Africa from the stranglehold of apartheid, someone asked Bishop Desmond Tutu, “What keeps you going?

What makes you so sure that justice will prevail?”

He let go of his characteristic, infectious laugh, raised up his arms, and said, “But I’m baptized!” The listening audience was befuddled.

He laughed even more and went on:

“Baptized into Christ ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female’.

This is God’s promise to us, my friends. God is faithful, and God does not break promises.

Remember your baptism!” *I*

I wonder, can we summon up such a resonant sense of grace through baptism that it can help us find our way through our own ‘dark night of the soul’ times, that it can help First United right ship and navigate her way through current troubled waters?

We too, like Jesus, have been called for life and anointed for ministry in the waters of baptism.

We too, like the Hebrews who experienced Exile, are yet beloved and precious children of God.

A God who also says to us during these troubled times:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.... Fear not, I am with you.”

A God who can and will empower us and enable us to pass through the turbulence and distress and find a passageway into the future God invites us to be a part of.

For Reflection:

To paraphrase a memorable challenge issued by former US President, John F. Kennedy:

“Ask not what your church can do for you; ask what you can do for your church.”

For the next five or six minutes reflect on these possibilities and share your thoughts with others who may be with you.

If you are on your own, feel free to phone someone else in the congregation who might also be on their own.

[Slide with questions – Kathleen will be playing five minutes of meditative music]

1. Name one or two things, attitudes, etc. you need to release or change so that you can help First United move forward.

2. What is Jesus inviting you to be and do so that you can navigate troubled waters in your own life?

3. What is Jesus inviting you to do so you can help First United navigate the troubled waters she is currently caught up in.

Feel free to continue to have reflection and conversation time about questions like these later on today or later on this week. **[end slide]**

Let us remember our baptism and be thankful and hopeful

*“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.... Fear not, I am with you,”* says our God.

*I Noted by William S. Kervin in “Baptism Beyond Babyhood”, Worship for All Seasons II,
(Year C), United Church Publishing House, Toronto, ON: 2006, page 74.*