

**Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 & Isaiah 43: 1-7 “The Greater Is Still to Come” Rev. Janet Chapman**

**Occasionally, life interrupts the best-laid plans and this week was no exception. I had planned to focus on baptism this morning, because this is the Sunday we traditionally reflect on Jesus’ baptism each year. It is a story that is featured in all 4 gospels and therefore considered quite significant to those who compiled the Bible. I was looking forward to telling you one of my favorite stories about an 8-year-old who was baptized one Sunday morning, and on the way home from church, suddenly broke down in tears. The parents asked what on earth could be wrong and he sniffled, “The pastor who baptized me said I was going to be brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you instead!” But it will have to wait.**

**Seriously, though, the unfolding wildfire crisis to our south necessitated revisiting our time together for what could be helpful in times such as these. None of us knew that when we began our week last Monday that this Sunday we would be filled with concern for friends and loved ones living in LA, and that we would be brought back to the fear and dreadful unease of 7 years ago when the Carr and Camp wildfires ended up on our own doorstep, literally in our own backyards for some. Such trauma is permanently ingrained in the memories of some and with each similar event, we have to take a deep breath, dig deep, and find our equilibrium once more. I don’t presume to understand the workings of God but I do say that never has God failed to provide a word of hope in such times just when I needed it. Ready to scrap today’s scripture last Wednesday and plot out a new plan, I turned to the other lectionary-based assigned text for today, laid out by scholars decades ago to partner with the story of Jesus’ baptism. There it was from Isaiah 43: “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you won’t be scorched and flame won’t burn you. I am the Lord your God, the holy one of Israel, your savior.” Now mind you, these words have been read over multiple generations time and time again, but today we are reminded that God’s message never loses its relevance and often the right words come at the right time.**

Now some will tell you that just isn't true; the famous Karl Marx being one of them. Critical of religion, he called it the "opiate of the masses." By that, he meant that God's consistent promises of a better life in the future dulled people's sense to the injustice and oppression all around them. For that, he was named an enemy of the faith but I prefer to think of him as a disappointed idealist who misunderstood God's promises. Having been raised on the prophets' teachings and promises of justice, peace, and freedom in God's realm, he was disillusioned by all the pain he witnessed. And he saw the church as a major contributor to that pain. Many of the ideals he sought are actually verbatim from Scripture. Unfortunately, he took those ideals out of their original context of faith, and turned them into a violent social upheaval that caused even more suffering. But when you look at some of the promises, maybe you understand how he could get so dissatisfied. Isaiah, speaking in the name of the Lord, promises God's people that even if they go through fires, they won't be burned; even if they go through floods, they won't be overwhelmed. But who can go through fire without getting burned? Who can go through a flood without getting soaked to the bone? And when you realize that the prophet was addressing people living in exile, having been enslaved and moved to an alien land, it makes the contrast even more stark. These are people who have lost everything – homes, livelihoods, neighborhoods, cherished family treasures and in some cases, even family. Sound familiar? They have gone through the worst catastrophe imaginable. They have gone thru the flood and were overwhelmed; they have been through the fire and were burned by the experience – or so it would seem from their perspective.

Yet often our perspective is limited. In times of loss, our perspective isn't always the most reliable. None of us completely understand why catastrophe hits and it can easily feel like God broke God's promises to us at our baptism, that God called us out by name but then failed to embrace us in the shelter and refuge of God's protective arms. We have tried our best to follow God's purpose for us and instead of a reward, we get 'punished.' But that's when we must remember that we simply don't know how God will be working in any given circumstance. It is not that God wills for

tragedies to occur, but neither is God absent in those times. In each situation, we grow in our knowledge, maturity, and understanding of God's purpose for our lives. Hopefully we learn and grow over time as God's purpose takes shape with each significant encounter. If we allow them, hardship and pain can help open us up to what God has for us in the future. The mistake we make is thinking that God will prevent such suffering – that was never been part of the deal. The deal, as Isaiah says, is that God won't abandon us nor let us be destroyed. If we let God be God in our lives, then we don't have to be afraid of the future, for God has greater things to come.

Story after story is arising from the ashes in LA about the good that humanity can accomplish in the worst of times. We remember what that was like. Forever etched in my memories are Al & Linda S showing up here as flames shot up in the western sky to pack up church records, Jim & Julie W made sandwiches for the National Guard stationed at Placer & Buena Ventura, volunteers assisted those staying in Burrell with pets because Red Cross couldn't take them, Bonnie S spent hours on search and rescue, Jim B worked with Stan & Pauline S. to restore their burnt garage, Betty W worked tirelessly with the community's Long Term Recovery to disburse financial donations, Illinois teens were housed and fed here while working to clear brush at Marci F's place, and so much more. I won't stop telling these stories because they are evidence of my favorite scripture, Romans 8:28: "We know that God works all things together for good for the ones who love God, for those who are called according to God's purpose." It is from such promises in Romans and Isaiah that we are reminded that no matter what we may go through, God loves us and will always be with us. Jesus' baptism was one more sign that God was beginning to fulfill these promises. As John the Baptist says in our Lucan scripture interpreted by Gene Peterson's *The Message*, "I'm baptizing you here in the river. But the main character in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will ignite the kingdom life, a fire, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out." John is telling us that Jesus is the one who is going to bring the light of God's realm into this dark world, who will usher in God's justice, peace, and freedom. We still see way too much of the opposite, but God

**isn't finished with us yet, changing us from the inside out. Trusting in this, we as God's baptized children can bring ourselves up in a Christian home, no matter our age, and welcome the greater life still to come.**