When the writer of Psalm 139 cast about for an image to depict existential despair, he chose an ocean voyage out of sight of land: “If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (vv. 9-10). John the Baptist’s converts waded into the Jordan with trepidation. To lose your footing and go under the water was to flirt with death itself. Water terrified them.

Which may bewhy so many Christians view the sacrament of baptism as a spiritual insurance policy. That little dose of fear about death functions like an inoculation. Even though most Christian traditions now teach that baptism is never an emergency, plenty of new parents instinctually think that the sooner Junior gets “dunked,” the better. You never know what could happen.

It is sometimes said that baptism conveys an “indelible mark” on those who pass through the waters, branding them forever as children of God. If that is that case, then wouldn’t it make sense to assume that the Lord keeps a special eye out for those displaying such a mark? It would, but that does not mean we who are baptized are promised an easier road than others. Baptism conveys a promise of eternal life, by the grace of Christ, but it does not mean the baptized person receives a special certificate of protection from earthly perils.

Today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah tells us what baptism does promise during our life on this earth. Isaiah does not mention the Christian sacrament, of course, but he does speak about the experience of passing through the waters, and where God may be trusted to be as we do so: “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; 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” (vv. 1-2). A little later, the prophet supplies the reason why the Lord would promise such a thing: “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you” (v. 4).

For Jews of Isaiah’s time, the prophet’s words called to mind the nation-building experience of their ancestors, when Moses led the Hebrews through the waters of the sea to freedom. The recollection of that experience is poignant because the people to whom Isaiah writes are exiles in Babylon. They did not voyage across the waves, but they did traverse oceans of sand, to reside in a miserable ghetto at the command of their foreign overlords. In exile they feel just as abandoned as if they had been flung to the “farthest limits of the sea.” Any thought of returning home seems like a dream to them now.

But Isaiah holds fast to God’s promise. The day will come, he reassures them, when the Lord will lead them back through the fearsome waters as they return home! Not only will God fulfill God’s promise to them, but God will also go with them: “When you pass through the waters, I will be *with* you…” God may not promise to shield us from the ordinary sufferings of this life, but God does promise to be with us, close at hand, as we endure them. The Lord never promises we will not get our feet wet, but God does attest that the waters will never rise over our heads or smash us into oblivion. God will accompany us through this life, and even onward to the life beyond. Such a promise is a powerful source of comfort and strength.

There are two meanings to this word “accompany.” The first is the sense of one person walking alongside another. The story from the end of Luke’s gospel comes to mind: how, on the road to Emmaus, a mysterious man overtakes two of Jesus’ disciples who are sadly trudging their way along. At first, they do not know it is their Lord walks with them; but as they gather for the evening meal and he breaks the bread, their eyes are opened and they recognize him, just before he vanishes from their sight (Luke 24:13-35). Isaiah’s promise is that God accompanies us, walking beside us, in just that way.

The second sense of the word “accompany,” with respect to the way God accompanies us, is found within a greater context. We, the baptized, are members of a larger company: the church, the body of Christian believers. Baptism is the sacrament of entry into that hallowed company. This means that, as we encounter rough patches in life, there are other pilgrims around us, Christian friends to catch us when we stumble and fall. In seasons of heartache and loss, there are sisters and brothers pledged to walk alongside us, to share with us some of their own strength.

There’s an old story about 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.”

Each week, in worship, we symbolically live out this work of being, together, a company of believers. Individual prayer and meditation are wonderful things, but they are no substitute for life together in the larger company that is the church. The Lord promises to be with us as we pass through the waters. A significant part of the way God accomplishes this is through each one of us, week after week, as we gather as God’s people in person or online.

We don’t just come to worship for individual inspiration. We don’t just come to receive. We come to offer hope through our prayer and praise. Our presence in the company of pilgrims is important to others. Our presence in Christian community, week after week, is a ministry of witness to our faith. It just may be that someone sitting beside us, or behind us, or in front of us, or worshiping online is in pain or enduring some terrible trouble. Much of the time, we have no way of knowing this. Nor do we have any way of knowing how important it is to that fellow believer who sees us engaging in worship.

What if such a person comes to church on Sunday, feeling debilitating spiritual pain or doubt, and sees instead an empty sanctuary or one so nearly empty that prayers ring hollow and the hymn-singing is entirely lacking in joy? What if that person logged on and found few others there? We would be failing to perform that Christ-like work of accompanying, making it difficult for our neighbors to remember that when they pass through the waters, God is beside them.

How firm a foundation God gives us, in our life together as church, for persevering through hard times: “When through the deep waters I call thee to go, the rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; for I will be near thee, thy troubles to bless, and sanctify to thee they deepest distress.” As we sing those words, we raise our song in the company of others, whose very presence signifies that we worship a God who accompanies us!

Prayer: Almighty and Sovereign LORD, God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: we praise you for your faithfulness to your promises. We thank you for your redemptive work through many generations. We deeply appreciate you sending your Son, and our Messiah, to redeem us. We praise you for inspiring the Scriptures to teach us your truth. Hear, now, our deep gratitude for the blessing of belonging to you and knowing that we can trust our future with you. Bless your people with an awesome sense of your abiding presence and use us to bring you glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

**In Good Company**

Sunday, January 9, 2022 [Isaiah 43:1-7](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+43%3a1-7&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

This Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. Coming so soon after Christmas, this festival often gets overlooked; but it is an event which is central to the church’s tradition. According to all four gospels, before Jesus does anything as a teacher and healer, he hikes up his robe, scrambles down the muddy riverbank and wades into the Jordan to be baptized by his cousin John (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–23; John 1:29–33).

Why does he do it? Theologians hotly debate that question. Why must the sinless Son of God receive this potent sign of repentance and new life? Is Jesus not himself the very source of new life promised in the baptismal waters? Some theologians are quick to explain that Jesus does not need to be baptized, but he allows John push him under the water purely for our sake, as an example. Jesus is modeling Christian repentance, but not actually doing it.

But this explanation is off base, in my opinion. I believe that what Jesus received from John that day was not a Christian baptism, but a Jewish one. In many first-century Jewish sects, including the one led by John, the pathway into a life of serious religious discipline led through water. As the Israelites of old passed through the Red Sea from slavery into freedom, and later crossed through across the Jordan into the Promised Land, so any serious believer must do the same.

If you were to make a list of the world’s great maritime traditions, the Jewish people would be far from the top. The Vikings would be up there, in their dragon-ships. So would the ancient Irish, braving the Hebridean Sea in their sealskin coracles. Portuguese merchants fought wind and waves as they rounded the Cape of Good Hope, returning with costly spices from the Indies to revolutionize European cooking. The British mastered the seas for centuries, proudly singing: “Rule, Britannia! Britannia, rule the waves!”

Nobody ever accused the Jews of trying to rule the waves. They were a desert people, nomadic herders of sheep and goats. They had a seacoast, but no great desire to venture out onto the Mediterranean. Apart from the miserable experience of the prophet Jonah, the only Jewish seafaring we read about in the Bible is fishing boats bobbing on the Sea of Galilee, always in sight of land. The sea held countless terrors as the domain of leviathan, the sea serpent who represented Israel’s enemies (Psalm 74:14; Isaiah 27:1).