

“Through the Waters”

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**Installation Service of Rev. Michele Ward
Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church**

We’ve just heard a text that has some of the most overtly loving and kind language from God to God’s people in the entire bible. It is a beautiful passage, in the middle of a bigger poetic love letter spanning a few chapters in Isaiah. As with everything in the bible, context is crucial, and gives us a sense of the bigger picture and deeper meaning.

Part of the context of this text is that the people who originally heard it had been in exile for a long time. Their temple had been destroyed. They’d been living in exile, under a foreign government, surrounded by people who practiced a foreign religion, and they were seen as less-than in many ways. By all the metrics for success in the ancient world, the nation of Israel had failed. Torn apart within by civil war and corrupt leaders, attacked by many foreign nations, and called to task by God for turning away from their calling to uphold justice and care for the widow and orphan, anyone who had heard of Israel thought of its people as failures. Worst of all, the temple was destroyed.

Although God had never wanted to reside in a temple—in the early days when they decided to build a temple, God said quite plainly that God preferred to move among the people in the ark of the covenant. But the Israelites insisted and God relented, and over the years the temple and

the presence of God became linked in the Israelites' minds. If the temple was destroyed, how would they encounter God? Was God gone too?

Today's text comes after years of pain and hardship, years of grief, years of feeling abandoned by God and feeling the weight of the consequences of their sin. This text, as one scholar notes, functioned as an invitation from God to the Israelites to return home and begin to rebuild from the ruins. These words were God's way of encouraging the Israelites to do the work of rebuilding. These words were also a way that God reminded the Israelites of their true identity—not as defeated failures, but as beloved creations, beloved children, of God.

Now at first glance, the call to go home and rebuild sounds amazing. The Israelites finally get to go home! No more being put down by Babylonians! They get to go back to the place that holds so many memories, so many places in which they experienced flourishing, so many memories of experiencing the presence of God. They get a fresh start, a clean slate, a new beginning.

But it would be rebuilding... from *ruins*. Every corner would show evidence of the destruction and loss they had suffered. It wouldn't really be a clean slate—it'd be a return to a big mess, and a lot of work salvaging what could be saved or reused. There would be memories of when things were good, but there'd be just as many painful memories. The work of rebuilding would be exhausting, and as a people, the Israelites were already tired.

They might have longed and loved to be home...but it wouldn't have been the same. There's no real going back—only forward, into the unknown of a new chapter, even if it was in a setting that they had known before.

Now, it is important to note that we cannot fully understand or empathize with what the Israelites experienced, as people whose religion has become the religion of the masses and of empire. Those of us who were born into a certain level of privilege whether that's because of our class, our family's income, our skin color, or our location, do not have much in common with the Israelites who heard these words.

Our siblings of color, our siblings seeking asylum at our borders, our siblings who lived on these lands centuries before they were “discovered”—those are the folx who have the most in common with the Israelites. Those are the folx who understand what it is like to carry the weight of centuries of pain and loss. If we are white Christians in the United States of America, we can't fully comprehend the experience of the Israelite people, and it is irresponsible to read ourselves into this story as having experienced persecution in the same way they did.

That being said, there are many entry points into this text, and if we are aware of what biases we bring to it, we can still find a word for us from God within it. While it may be an irresponsible reading for some of us to view ourselves as the same as the persecuted Israelites, the Israelites were going through a very common human experience—they were experiencing a deep sense of nostalgia.

Nostalgia is an incredibly powerful feeling. It can motivate people to do all kinds of things. It was clearly a strong influence in our last presidential election. The Harvard Business Review had an article about the 30 values that motivate people—kind of like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs but more about feelings/values than concrete needs—things like nostalgia, feeling hope, belonging, quality. These values are what motivate people to buy things, to be involved in organizations, and the article focused on products and companies that offer the highest number of values. On the pyramid, nostalgia was somewhere in the middle, below hope, belonging, and self-transcendence, but above convenience, sensory appeal, and saves time.

Nostalgia can drive us to do all kinds of strange things—hold onto possessions even if they’re not usable anymore; stay in a town even after it has changed dramatically because we have positive memories of it. It can be a strong factor in how we become preoccupied with preserving institutions to look and feel the way they did when we were little, or when our parents were children, even if that means excluding others from participating or arguing over carpet color instead of how best to serve our neighbors.

What’s more, so often we are nostalgic for something that was never actually real—we are nostalgic for something that is in our head, a sentimental, idealized, and subjective memory of reality. The problem with longing for the good ol’ days is that most likely those days were good for some but not for others. The Israelites were longing for a period of time of peace that in the grand arc of their story was quite

brief. Figuring out their identity is a thread that runs through the entire bible—humans are always trying to figure out who we were created to be, how to be in relationship with each other and with God.

For the Israelites, in their search to figure out who they were, they made so many mistakes—they tried to imitate their neighbors, they worshipped other gods, they abandoned their call to justice, they listened to fear instead of to the voice of God.

When we are nostalgic, especially for something that is only real in our memory, we can spend so much time there we can't see the blessings that are coming to us in the new season—even if the new season is scary and full of unknowns.

When we have lost a lot—whether those losses include possessions, shelter, loved ones, or health—pain and trauma can rewire our brains to expect more pain and trauma. It is a way of self-preservation—our bodies are trying to prevent us from experiencing the trauma again so things that aren't really dangerous trigger all sorts of internal alarms. Even if we have not experienced significant trauma, the things that have been hard for us tend to nurture a sense of cynicism that buries itself deep in our spirits. We are so quick to assume the worst.

We often walk into new chapters of our lives with a significant amount of fear—what if there are figurative waters and rivers that could overwhelm, fires that could consume? We view the waters and the fire as the end—as things that are impossible to survive.

What's so interesting about this text is that God doesn't say "if" the waters come, "if" the fire comes; God says WHEN.

God knows that going home to rebuild will not be all sunshine and roses. God knows it will be a mixture of joy, hope, and deep sorrow. God knows that even once they are settled, hardships will still probably come at some point.

But the difference is, where we assume the worst, God assumes the best.

God **presumes** resilience and survival—God believes, by loving us, by giving us these words of love and hope, we will be capable of resilience, growth, rebuilding, and new life.

We may not be in a situation in which we're called to go back to a ruined homeland and rebuild. But we do tend to assume that any failure or loss we might experience means the end, the worst. So often we assume the worst of each other, especially if trust has been damaged in some way. Our boss calls us in for a meeting, a loved one calls late at night out of the blue, we receive unclear results from a health check-up—our minds go to the worst possible outcome.

But God, encounter after encounter, year after year, century after century, assumes and expects a good outcome. God assumes the best. God is not just the source of unending love, God is the source of unending HOPE and even optimism. To have been in relationship with creation, with humanity, this long—God must have endless amounts of hope.

What a gift, what a blessing, to be in relationship with a creator who creates and sustains us from a place of hope, possibility, and imagination.

When people in our faith tradition are ordained to a particular ministry—whether that is as a ruling elder or a pastor, one of the questions they are asked is: “Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?”

That question is not an afterthought; it’s not a small ask; it’s not unintentional. The God who created us, the God who continues to assume the best, the God who views us not only with eyes of love but also with eyes of hope—this God does this with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. All of us are called to become people who love like God loves, as close as we can manage. And the beauty of this relationship is that God empowers us to love like that. When we pass through the waters and the fire, when we think all is lost, when we think we’ve failed too much and we are past the point of being lovable or loved, God says, “all is not lost. I see a different future. I am with you, even here, even as you feel like you’re treading water, even as you feel like everything you know is being transformed or taken away by the circumstances you’re in. I am here, I have called you by name, and I love you.”

As this community welcomes Michele to participate in its life and ministry, all of you and Michele are called to do new things, to build up and nurture this community and those outside these walls, to enter into a new chapter of life.

I know Michele to be a pastor who is not afraid to risk—to go out on that limb where the fruit is—for the sake of the Gospel. From what I know of the community here at Brown Memorial, there is also a spirit-led willingness to follow God in the adventure of loving and living out our faith.

When people of faith risk something new instead of stay in what's comfortable and familiar, the possibility of failure is still there. Things may not go as planned. Outcomes might look different than anyone imagines. This text reminds us that the question is not *if* the waters will come, but *when*. Those moments will be the ones when the temptation to get lost in nostalgia will be the strongest. When the waters and the fire comes, that's when we'll be the most tempted to assume the worst.

Our call, then, becomes to retrain our hearts and minds to start with hope. We can still acknowledge fear—it's not wrong to fear. We turn our backs on our vocation when we act from fear instead of hope. We were created by a God who operates from a place of hope and imagination, and we were created *in the image* of that hope-filled God. We are called to assume that we have the **capacity** for **resilience** because of *who God is* and *how God loves us*. We are called to trust that even if our future includes those things that threaten to overwhelm, there will also be deep joy and meaning and love. That God will be there, reminding us, through Scripture and through the words of others, of God's love and hope for us.

My dad passed away a couple days after I turned 10 years old, very unexpectedly. 18 months later, my mother was diagnosed with breast

cancer. Though she has been in remission for over 20 years, you can imagine how difficult that season of life was for our family. My mom had been on the church council for a while as the treasurer, and that church was my safe place—I knew every nook and cranny, I played there, worshipped there, learned there. It was a small church in Towson, and they loved us well, especially in this season.

They had a tradition, as many churches do, of placing flowers on the altar on All Saints Sunday and reading the names of those in the community that had passed away in the previous year. My dad passed away in September, and just 8 weeks later on All Saints Sunday, we heard his name read aloud in worship.

I don't remember much about that service, but I do remember afterwards we were walking to our car, and the pastor came hurrying out of the church, a single rose in a vase in his hand. He wanted to make sure that we took my dad's flower home—he knew the significance of a small piece of beauty in the midst of a terrible season. He knew that a reminder of the church's love for us would be a small but powerful source of comfort. That church that raised me in the faith, that church really got it. They understood what it looked like to walk with people through the waters and the rivers and the fire. They knew not to dismiss our grief. They knew to believe in our God-given capacity for resilience *for us* when we couldn't believe it for ourselves. They knew God was with us, that God had called us God's own, that God loved us, and when we had trouble believing it, they gave us reminders of that truth, signs and acts of kindness to point us home.

This is the work of the Church. To love and hope the best we can and in all of our love and hope, point toward the God whose love and hope and imagination never ends. No matter how deep the waters, how strong the current, how overwhelming the fire—God is right there with us, giving us the strength to continue, giving us the capacity for resilience, calling us forward to a vision for something new and beautiful. This is Good News. Amen.