January 13th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Worthy of the Waters

I. Setting the Scene

Isaiah, in his prophecy, speaks about a time the exiles cannot comprehend. A time when water will not submerge them, a time where walking through fire will not leave a blister, a time where the boundaries that humans have created in this world will be broken down. The passage we hear today from Isaiah is one that I would call ‘warm and fuzzy’ – one where we hear how loved we are, how fear does not have to consume us, and how precious we are in God’s sight. We hear the very words, ‘For I love you’ – a love that is indescribable and uncontainable, a love that cannot be measured by any human hands or instrument.

What we do not see in this passage is the passage that comes before Isaiah 43, where God is calling the exiles on the carpet to all the wrong they’ve done and the sin they have committed. In the last few verses of Isaiah 42, God speaks in stern words about Israel’s disobedience. The words ‘heat of anger’ and ‘fury of war’ are phrases within the passage before – showing in this strong language that Israel did not deserve the words of Isaiah 43, but by grace, received them. In this way, the beauty and the redemption found in Isaiah 43 is even stronger than before, for a God who is willing to love God’s disobedient children. This passage even more so shares with the exiles that despite their sin, it is more important who and whose they are. God’s words of comfort and restoration are greater than Israel’s sin and defeat.

II. The Waters

 This Sunday we celebrate the Baptism of the Lord in the waters, in one of the very basic elements of creation. In Isaiah to today, we look at water and fire as a way of cleansing and purifying. We need water in all its forms to keep us alive and in fire we keep our home and our hearths warmed. These very acts of creation are acts of God and integral to our life today.

 Perhaps that is why water as the means of baptism was such a significant tool. John the Baptizer initially used the waters of the Jordan to bless the people, to purify them, and to cleanse them. And then Jesus comes along and gets baptized – which is an interesting turn of events. Why does the very Son of God, a divine being of the Trinity, one who was here before the beginning of time – why would Jesus need to be baptized? Isn’t he as clean and pure as one could ever be?

 He is. The baptism is not for his sake, but for ours, to set an example of what believers can tangibly do to cleanse and heal from the very creation he made. His baptism encourages our own baptism.

III. Baptism as Sacrament

 In the Presbyterian tradition, there are two sacraments, baptism and communion. Baptism is the moment where we step into the covenant, where we hear the voice of God saying ‘You are mine’ and we say ‘Yes we are.’ In baptism, we are marked and claimed as God’s own children, a point where we can’t go back. Even those who left the church a long time ago, they are still claimed as God’s own. In baptism, we recognize that in fire or in flood, in pain or in joy, in life and in death – we are God’s own.

 In our baptism, we find our worth, our God, who has claimed us again and again, just as he did with the exiles, to say – despite your sin, my grace abounds. This is a powerful and loving statement – for it tells us where we find our worth.

 Many of you may be familiar with the song, “Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places”, debuting in 1980 through singer Johnny Lee. He was looking for love in all the wrong places and all the wrong faces. Now, he’s definitely talking about a different kind of love than the one we find in God, but the statement still stands – we as a people of faith, despite our baptism and God’s ever-abounding grace, still look for love and worth in all the wrong places.

 In adolescence, the questions of, “Who am I? Where do I belong? What makes me worthy?” crops up. Perhaps the questions are overpowering at that time in our lives, but I know they are questions we still ask ourselves in a myriad of ways throughout our life. In youth, we look at our peers at school, at our grades, at our teachers, at our parents, at anything that can verify our worthy. As we grow older and enter the workforce, we look for that next benchmark, the boss or supervisor that will review us, or our salary as a sign of who and whose we are. What we need to do, what we are called to do, according to the prophet Isaiah, is to step back and look up, and to recognize that our world is bigger than we ever imagined and that God’s grace and love is exactly where our worth is found.

 It’s complicated, isn’t it – because telling you this is much easier than enacting it in our everyday lives. And here’s the truth – while I’d still encourage you to do well in school or work hard at your job – because it’s important and this is where we learn and grow and earn the money that we need to survive. Yet, and you might want to close your ears – the truth, the real truth is – even if you dropped out of school, even if you failed every class, even if you snuck out of class for a free day off – God’s love and claiming of you as God’s own doesn’t change. The truth is – even if you quit work, stayed at home in bed all day long, and didn’t do a thing for the rest of your life - God’s love and claiming of you as God’s own doesn’t change.

 Now, these are not life style recommendations by your pastor, not by any stretch. Yet they are strong, perhaps exaggerated statements to say that God has claimed you as God’s own, and no matter what you do, no matter how hard you try to defy God, God’s love for you is so great and vast and high that the places of your failures or defeats do not keep you from God’s love.

IV. North, South, East, West

 And perhaps you’d say, “Well, that’s not fair – I work very hard and you’re telling me that my neighbor who is a couch potato is just as loved by God?” and I have to admittedly say... “Yes.” We don’t get to choose who God loves and doesn’t love – the boundaries we’ve placed in our lives are not God’s boundaries.

 That’s why, in Isaiah, God calls his children from North, South, East, and West to come to Him. God calls God’s own sons and daughters from around the globe to be here, to be with us, despite our differences, our lifestyles, our cultural inclinations, or our desire for comfortable community. God’s love calls all.

 In communion, we hear those known lines, “From North and South, East and West, God calls God’s people to sit at table with Him” in the Lord’s Supper. God calls all, all people, despite your belief on your worth or anyone elses, and unites us again and again through remembering those waters of baptism and coming to this table to remember our ever faithful and ever loving God who claims us as His very own. Amen.