

Sermon – Isaiah 43:1-7; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
Baptism of Our Lord – Year C  
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“In over Your Head”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. “Dad, are we ever going to make it home?” The question came from the back of our car yesterday. We had just crossed the two-hour mark of being caught in a near-total standstill, having moved less than a mile during those two hours. Apparently a semi-trailer had jackknifed somewhere up ahead of us. We were on I-65, returning from visiting family near Indianapolis, and it felt like we might never move again. It’s a fairly hopeless feeling, being trapped on the interstate with nowhere to go – no exits to take, no way to turn around. We were simply stuck. We were trapped there for so long that I even had time to rework my sermon for today and insert this anecdote about being trapped on the highway! “Are we ever going to make it home, Dad?” I turned to face my child and with parental compassion replied, “No, probably not. We’re highway people now. This is where we live.” I took a moment to enjoy my fatherly wit – I may have been the only one laughing – and then said: “Of course we’re going to make it home. Mom and I don’t know when, for sure, but we’ll make it home. You don’t have to worry. We’ll make it home.” Two hours of not moving became almost three, and even once the road was cleared of the accident, traffic conditions remained dicey. What should have been a three-and-a-half hour drive became a nearly eight-hour journey. But we made it home, with a sermon illustration to boot.
2. Are we ever going to make it home? Yesterday, I felt that I could answer “Yes” to that question with a fair amount of certainty for my children. But I wonder

if this question was asked of their parents by the children among God's Chosen People, trapped in Babylonian exile. They, too, had taken a journey, but it was not one of their own choosing. Through generations of sinfulness the people had put themselves in a position to be conquered. And now, all seemed lost. All *was* lost. Their temple destroyed and their lands taken, they were forced from all that they had ever known. Surely they asked: Are we ever going to make it home? The parents of the children of exile may not have been able to give an answer of hope, but that did not mean that there was no hope, no answer. For they were a people who had been created and formed, and that means that they had a Creator, a Maker. And that One had not forgotten them. Through Isaiah, a voice spoke into their despair: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you." God was saying: Don't be afraid, children of Israel, for I will redeem you, buy you back, and bring you home. Don't be afraid, for when you're in the waters, I'm in there with you, and I won't let you go under. Don't be afraid, for although you are stuck, trapped, exiled now, I will bring you home.

3. God would, in several generations, make good on this promise. Cyrus, King of Persia, instrument of the Lord, would conquer Babylon and free God's people. But that was not, was never, the full intent of God's plan or God's promise. For even returned to their homes, they would suffer oppression and occupation. God's promise to Israel was not, was never, only for Israel. God had bigger things in mind. And so it was that one day, almost 600 years after Isaiah spoke comfort and hope to an exiled, homeless people, a man descended from those people would walk down to the River Jordan, take his place among those who had come out to be baptized by a man named John, and begin to fulfill God's promises of old. John baptized with water, for the sake of repentance. He knew, God knew, that the people were stuck and needed to make a U-turn. But God also knew that the people were too stuck, too trapped, to do it for themselves. So God came down to the waters that day to do it for them. Luke alone among the evangelists points out that Jesus was

baptized at the same time as others. Luke wants us to imagine Jesus queuing up with these others, these sinners beloved by God, and taking his turn as one of us. So standing in solidarity with the stuck sinners he came to save, Jesus gets baptized. He goes under the waters with them, that he might begin drawing them out of the water and into newness of life.

4. It is not, of course, this baptism of Jesus at the Jordan that saves us. But here, baptized into our need, our sin, our death, Jesus begins the ministry that will lead to his baptism upon the cross of Calvary. It is his death and resurrection into which we have been baptized so that we, united by baptism into his death, would be freely gifted with resurrection life. In our baptism we find our sin condemned, ourselves washed and set free, and our lives now shaped by Jesus for the sake of God's purposes for God's people. It is for us now to work in Jesus' name to unstuck the stuck things of this world, to free those who are trapped by sin or suffering, by continuing to prepare the royal highway of which we sang in Advent, upon which Jesus comes to us each day.
5. It is also a task for each day to remember our baptism, to hear the proclamation that we are baptized children of God. For we, too, become stuck, trapped, forgetting the claim that God has graciously laid upon our lives. With everything else we hear in this noisy world, with all of life's cares and demands, it can be hard to hear God's voice. Perhaps we wish we could hear a voice with clarity, that the message would come through loud and clear. As Pastor Lauren mentioned at the beginning of worship, our email at Grace has been non-functional this past week. While our staff members have been working diligently to solve problems that I don't even fully understand, I have been worried, wondering what messages aren't coming through to me, what I'm not hearing. On the other hand, it's been an oddly freeing time for me. Unperturbed by the dinging that signals a new email, I've been able to have more face-to-face conversations, more phone calls, more interactions that are more real – that can convey more meaning than electronic

communication ever could. Sometimes we need certain noises to be silenced so that we can hear others more clearly. Baptized into his death and resurrection, Jesus has cleared away the noise and all that would keep you from hearing God's promise for you. So here, now hear God's Word for you: You, like Jesus and because of Jesus, are a daughter or son of God. You, like Jesus and because of Jesus, are beloved by the Lord of heaven and earth. You, like Jesus and because of Jesus, are one with whom God is well pleased, in whom God takes delight. And although the waters of your baptism have long since dried, you are still wet with the promise of God's clear word for you. Sins condemned, you are forgiven. Death defeated, you are alive. The way home has been cleared, for Jesus has made his home with you.

6. We will still get stuck. We will still feel trapped. We will feel the waters rising toward our heads. But you are not alone. God is not just waiting for you on the other side, encouraging you to make it through. God has come down to this earth, gone down under the waters of the Jordan, gone down under the stone of the tomb, gone deep down into death, to be with you through whatever you're going through, and to lift you up again. In Eugene Peterson's Bible translation, *The Message*, Isaiah says it this way: "When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end – because I am your God." Are we ever going to make it home? "Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home. I love you and you are mine." Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.