7-28/29-18 Rev. Amy Haines

Is 43:1-7 Danger: Rapids Ahead Road Signs Series

This summer we’ve been reflecting on the road signs we see on summer road trips and everyday travels, and how those same signs show up in our faith lives through the stories of the Bible. We’ve reflected on:

Rest stop ahead—when God calls us to Sabbath rest, to remember whose and who we are

One way—the assurance that Jesus is our way of faith, hope, and life

No U-turn—except through God’s grace and redemption

Detour—trusting God when faith or life takes us in an unexpected direction

Today’s road sign is a bit different. “Danger” signs, of any type, call us to be alert to potential problems.

Danger: Falling Rock Zone

Danger: Workers Ahead

Danger: High Voltage Lines

Yet Danger signs are not always seen only along the highway. In our national parks, you will find a Fire Danger warning sign. And along some waterways, you will find today’s sign: Danger: Rapids Ahead.

How many of you enjoy or have enjoyed canoeing or kayaking or boating or rafting? This past week our creation camp kids and some of our VBS helpers all went rafting near Waynesville. They were reminded that anytime you are out on the water, you must constantly be aware of your surroundings. When you are rowing down a river, you must pay attention to what is ahead. Even if it is a waterway you have traveled many times, water depths rise and fall, tree branches fall and shift, so two rides really are never the same. Some people would call those obstacles to overcome, and some people would say those obstacles add to the adventure of the journey.

I admit I have a love/hate relationship with water. I have never learned to swim. I can only stay in the water of pool or ocean for a limited time before I burn. Yet as a youth then as a youth group leader, I have been canoeing, tubing and even white water rafting at New River Gorge.

I have a hefty trust in strong helmets and life jackets. And in the people around me.

Yet if I was ever on the water, and came across this sign, I would panic if I could not make it to shore. (show sign: Attention: Class IV-V Rapids Ahead. Last Chance to Exit River Before Rapids)

Class IV and V rapids are the most strenuous, dangerous and fastest rapids classified on the river. This sign is truly another version of “Danger: Rapids Ahead.”

On the water, we can often get out before the waters get too rough. We can find those places along the riverbank to take out canoe or raft before the rapids overwhelm us.

Yet how often, in the midst of everyday life, do we suddenly find ourselves fighting what feels like a Class IV rapid with little to no warning? How often do we find that the river of life took a hard left turn, when our exit is on the right? How often, in the midst of everyday life, do we wish for a big, blinking neon Danger Sign before we get into situations that threaten to overwhelm us, before we encounter people who seek to throw us out of the raft, before we panic in fear and forget every safety procedure taught to us?

The flip side of a Class IV life rapid is just as dangerous—being so afraid of any rapid, so fearful of any danger, that we strive to control life into an ongoing smooth, calm ride in such a way that we never risk the chance to ride a rapid or two, never venture out, never change. The challenge with that danger is life gets so calm, so smooth, there is not enough wind to move the sails in our life, not enough openness to the Holy Spirit to take us where God wants us to go.

Moving from water to land…

...A small girl had been promised the privilege of climbing to a nearby hilltop where her brother enjoyed playing. But when she came within sight of the steep, rough path, she drew back in dismay. "Why, there isn't a smooth spot anywhere. It's all bumpy and stony!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," said her more experienced older brother, "but how else would we ever climb to the top if it wasn't? The stones and bumps are what we step on to get there."

--Source Unknown. Sermonillustrations.com:trials

If you feel like there are days when the path is steep, with more stones blocking your way than helping your step, or feel like there are days when the waves threaten to swamp your boat instead of pushing it downriver, or feel like there are days when there is no wind to move your sails, know that you are not alone.

If we were to turn to one another and share our stories of just this past week, we would share stories of stress and stories of contentment, stories of storms and stories of calm. Through our stories we would admit to times of fear, yet also give thanks for the foundation of our faith.

And no matter whether you are here today in worship in the midst of calm or storm, contentment or stress, know this: God is calling out to every one of us today:

“Do not fear the rapids. Do not fear the calm. I am with you. I love you. You are mine.”

Those are words of faithful assurance.

Those are words of love spoken by our compassionate God.

Yet those are also words hard to hear and accept by so many of us who struggle to make sense of tragedy, who question God’s presence, who feel unworthy of such love.

And we are not alone.

Consider to whom God first spoke these words. God’s people, the Israelites, were a defeated and demoralized people living in exile, evicted from the Promised Land after having been conquered in battle by the Babylonians.

They had little to celebrate. The Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. It lay in ruins. Their religious cohesiveness had been diluted through their forced removal from the Promised Land and through intermarriage with the conquering nation. The actual eyewitnesses to the exile were growing older, and the younger generations knew the Promised Land only through story.

They struggled to remember who they were. They struggled to believe anymore in whose they were.

For 70 years in exile, all they had heard from God’s prophets were words of judgment, not grace. For 70 years in exile they had been reminded that the exile was because of their sin, a consequence of turning away from worship of the One True God. This judgment left little room for hope in a better future. Little hope for a return from exile.

When Isaiah began to offer hope and comfort and reassurance rather than judgment and condemnation, the exiled people struggled to believe the word of God.

It was hard for them to hear that God was still claiming them as beloved children, still promising to be with them in the rough waters and fires of life. They felt like God had abandoned them, yet Isaiah proclaimed God was still with them. Even in exile. They had almost given up hope of one day returning to Jerusalem. Yet now Isaiah was declaring that God would make a way home for them.

God still loves us? God still cares for us? God still wants us to believe?

Their questions are timeless questions, still asked in our world today.

God loves me? Isn’t illness and death and struggle God’s punishment for my sins? If God cares so much for us, then why do we have to suffer? Why won’t God answer my prayers the way I want God to answer them? Am I willing to trust in God?

Thankfully, God is big enough to handle our questions and struggles, our doubts and fears.

And in the midst of calm and storm, God proclaims to us today what God said to the Israelites long ago: “Fear not, I am with you. Fear not, you are mine.”

Fear not? We live in a world with much to fear!

Companies continue to move or close. Finances stretch thin. Politics stress everyone out.

Honest dialogue has given way to stubborn ideology. Marriages fail. Death comes suddenly.

Depression pulls us down. Our denomination is facing a turning point in February. Our local church struggles with raising up servant leaders. The pace of so many of our lives is frenetic.

We wonder about the future for children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews.

There is much to fear!

Yet God declares, “fear not. I am with you.

I am with you in the raging waters.

I am with you when you walk through the fire.

I am with you in the exile.

I am with you at the cross.

I am with you in the lions’ den.

I am with you in a foreign land.

I am with you when you feel unworthy.

I am with you when you search for love.”

In all the ways and all the places in which we are afraid, God says fear not. Yes, you will face dangerous rapids and deadly calm. No, life is not always the smooth sailing you envision.

Even so, God declares, no matter what you face, no matter what danger zones you must navigate, “I will be with you. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. You are mine.”

..John Wesley, early in his career, was on a sea voyage with his brother Charles. They were crossing the Atlantic to Georgia where they would do mission work in America. During the passage, a great storm arose, such a great storm that the passengers and crew thought they may not survive. Even Wesley feared for his own life. But below decks he found a group of immigrants who were singing hymns and praying. These were the Moravians, religious refugees from central Europe and Germany who founded one of the greatest missionary movements of all time. These Moravians were completely calm, and they kept on singing and praying through the whole storm. They were not afraid.

--“Godspeed Living” 1-7-07 homileticsonline.com

Wherever we are, and whatever we face, God promises to be present with us.

During VBS these past two weeks our Rafting Ready Verse was easily memorized by children and youth, as they repeated it time and again throughout the stations. If you were here at VBS,

join me now in once again saying our Rafting Ready Verse:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Isaiah 43:2.”

What a verse to memorize! What a message of grace!

Now I invite you all to say the verse with me:

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. Isaiah 43:2.”

God declares that when we are struggling through what feels like waters that threaten to overtake us, or rivers that threaten to swamp us, or fires that threaten to burn us, we are not alone. God is with us.

Notice, however, that God does not stop the waters or rivers or fire. God is not promising to keep us out of the rapids and storms of life. God does not say “if” but “when” you go through trials and tribulations.

We need to heed the sign that declares “Danger: Rapids Ahead”, for they will be in our future, in faith and in life.

God does not keep us away from our mistakes or hold us back from the consequences of our actions. God does not miraculously keep all believers out of harm’s way, free of cancer or struggle or pain. I would love to avoid any and all struggle. I would love to avoid any and all pain. I would love to avoid any and all conflict. Yet because we are human, with free choice to sin, surrounded by an unpredictable world, we will not always find life smooth sailing.

Yet God declares that in the midst of whatever we face in life, in the midst of class I or class V rapids, God is there with us. God will help us through our trials, through our storms, through our challenges, if we trust God’s presence with us.

Joanie Yoder once compared the storms of life to a car wash. She said,

..I’ll never forget my first experience using an automatic car wash. Approaching it with the dread of going to the dentist, I pushed the money into the slot, nervously checked and rechecked my windows, eased the car up to the line and waited. Powers beyond my control began moving my car forward as if on a conveyor belt. There I was, cocooned inside, when a thunderous rush of water, soap and brushes hit my car from all directions. What if I get stuck in here or water crashes in? I thought irrationally. Suddenly the waters ceased. After a blow-dry, my car was propelled into the outside world again, clean and polished.   
  
In the midst of all this, I remembered stormy times in my life when it seemed I was on a conveyor belt, a victim of forces beyond my control. “Car-wash experiences,” I now call them.

I remembered that whenever I passed through deep waters my Redeemer had been with me, sheltering me against the rising tide (Isaiah 43:2). When I came out on the other side, which I always did, I was able to say with joy and confidence, “He is a faithful God!”

--Joanie Yoder, “In the car wash,” Our Daily Bread, 2003

found in “Premature Obituary” 1-11-04 homileticsonline.com

..One day a pastor visited a farmer who was a member of his congregation. As the pastor climbed out of his car he noticed a windmill on the barn which carried an inscription. Squinting his eyes, the pastor could just make out the words: GOD IS FAITHFUL.   
“Do you mean,” asked the pastor,

“that God’s faithfulness depends on the direction the wind is blowing?”

“No!” said the farmer.

“The words mean that, regardless of which way the wind blows, God is faithful.”

-“Godspeed Living” 1-7-07 homileticsonline.com

God is faithful, and God loves us. God calls us to not be afraid, for God is with us.

As Luther Seminary Professor Terry Fretheim explains, Isaiah 43 proclaims that

"God values who you are. God honors your place in this relationship. And God places confidence in you to speak, and act, and pray in ways that God can use. For you are God's own vineyard, God's own garden of imagination, God's very own beloved."

--video on workingpreacher.org for IS 43

As we wind down our road signs summer series, as the calendar turns to August and families look ahead to a new routine, as you find yourself in the center of calm or storm, give thanks that God is speaking to you here today!

Claim God’s promises for your life. Cling to such promises in the midst of everyday life. Confidently proclaim the promises by the way your live and what you say. Do not fear, for God is with you. You are redeemed. You are claimed by name. You are loved. You are God’s beloved.

As I close today I invite you to watch and listen to one last song from VBS, a song based on the words of Isaiah called “I Will Be With You.” May you hear God speaking straight to your heart.

(play video)