



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“In Over Your Head”

Isaiah 43:1-7

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Aaryn Zhou remembers her first time in the deep end of the pool. She was nine; her family had just moved to a new city. And there was this pool in their apartment complex. And one day her dad says, “Let’s try out the pool.” Aaryn is super excited and her dad is meanwhile thinking, “[Aaryn] doesn’t know how to swim. Time to fix that.”

As soon as they get to the pool, her dad picks her up and throws her in the deep end. She remembers:

I start screaming. And I still [don’t] really know what [is] going on. And I [am] screaming and struggling in the water. And every few seconds I can kind of see above water my dad standing there like looking at me. And I’m screaming and he’s not really reacting.

And then I see like the other kids and their parents...I remember thinking like how [can] you not know how to swim? You just have to swim and be OK. Look at all these people staring at you. And look at the look on your dad’s face. Just swim.

And then I feel myself sinking and I can only see water around me. And then a few seconds later, I don’t know how long, I feel someone grab me. And then I see that it’s my dad. And we slowly get out of the pool.

The whole thing sounds pretty awful to me. Aaryn says that this incident didn’t traumatize her. In fact, it motivated her to learn how to swim.¹

Being thrown into the deep end before you know how to swim is more common than you might think. Here’s the thing. It’s totally unnecessary to throw a person into the deep end in this way. Totally unnecessary. Because life is going to do that to them anyways.

The first day of a new job. Thrown into the deep end. You have your first child. Thrown into the deep end. Your father has a stroke. Thrown into the deep end. Your child is diagnosed with cancer. Into the deep end. First day at a new school. Deep end. You lose your health insurance. Into the deep end. Your grandson becomes an addict. Thrown into the deep end.

And then there is debt. So many of us are drowning in it. It comes in many forms: credit cards, student loans, mortgages, car loans, personal loans. The average American now has about \$38,000 in personal debt, excluding home mortgages. One analyst says, “Despite recognizing that debt is dangerous waters, Americans are jumping in with both feet and struggling to stay afloat.”

¹<https://www.thisamericanlife.org/595/deep-end-of-the-pool>

So many of us are living in the deep end of the pool, struggling to keep our head above the water. Some of us, like Aaryn, feel ourselves sinking and only see water around us.

The words from today's text are written to people who are familiar with the deep end of the pool. The Israelites are in exile in Babylon, experiencing multiple layers of loss - loss of homeland, loss of identity, loss of hope. They fear that they will never go back home again, that they will lose touch with their faith, their history, their God. They are drowning in fear and loss.

Today's reading addresses that fear and loss and then some. Isaiah is quoting God when he writes:

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;
Because you are precious in my sight,
...and I love you...
Do not fear, for I am with you;

What a beautiful summary of God's claim on our lives.

God says to each one of us: I have called you by name, you are mine.

That has become for me the most important statement I can make about myself. And I know it to be true because of baptism.

I invite you to find your bulletins and turn to the insert and take a look at the list of folks we've baptized in the last year.

Kellan and Harrison, they belong to God. Aurora and Caroline are precious in God's sight. Ed, Charlyn and Kyle, the waters will not overwhelm them. God's never going to leave Atticus and McConnell. God will be with Henry and Grayson at every turn.

Whether you were baptized eighty years ago or you will be baptized sometime in the future, the good news is the same.

When you find yourself in the deep end, God will be with you.

That's good news. I say, but better yet, what do you say we avoid the deep end altogether. Better to stay in the shallow end of the pool. Right?

William Willimon used to be Dean of Chapel at Duke University. He recalls a visit to the campus from a representative from Teach for America. Teach for America tries to recruit this nation's most talented college graduates to go into some of the nation's worst public schools.

This woman stands up in front of a large group of Duke students and says to them,

I can tell by looking at you that I have probably come to the wrong place... Just looking at you, I can tell that all of you are a success. Why would you all be on this campus if you were not successful, if you were not going on to successful careers on Madison Avenue or Wall Street? And yet here I stand, hoping to talk one of you into giving away your life in the toughest job you will ever have. I am looking

for people to go into the hollows of West Virginia, into the ghettos of South Los Angeles and teach in some of the most difficult schools in the world. Last year, two of our teachers were killed while on the job. And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you are interested in that. So go on to law school, or whatever successful thing you are planning on doing. But if by chance, some of you just happen to be interested, I've got these brochures here that tell about Teach for America. Meeting's over."²

With that, the whole group stands up, pushes into the aisles, shoves each other aside, runs down to the front, and fights over the brochures.

Surprise. Surprise. These students are willing to jump into the deep end. They are ready and willing to throw themselves into a situation where they will struggle to stay afloat. Evidently, many of us want something more out of life than happiness. We yearn to be part of a project greater than ourselves.

That all means going into deep water. Willingly. Because that's where the good stuff is. The hard stuff. Which so often ends up being the good stuff. In the deep waters is where goodness dwells. Where meaning dwells

What does it look like for you to venture into deep waters?

Maybe it's a change of job or career path. Maybe it's signing up for a new volunteer opportunity in the community. Maybe venturing into deeper waters for you means taking on one of the great issues of our day – gun violence, immigration, global warming. Maybe it means reaching out to someone who has hurt you. Or maybe the risk that God wants you to take on is to do less –to take your own healing and wholeness seriously.

This is a good time to think about such things. There is this fabulous clean slate quality to this time of year. It doesn't matter what we did or didn't do last year. It's a new year, a fresh start, a new beginning.

In 2019, what does it look like for you to venture into deeper water? What risk is God calling you to take in the name of a more faithful and joyful life?

These are the right questions because we follow Jesus. Jesus is a deep end of the pool kind of guy. Who calls us to live a deep end of the pool kind of life. He invites us to leave the safety of the shallow water and venture into uncharted depths.

If you find yourself in the deep end, because of forces beyond your control or by choice, either way, know this.

When you pass through the waters, God will be with you;
And the waters, they will not overwhelm you;
Because you are precious in God's sight.
And God loves you.

Do not fear, for God is with you...

Amen.

² Will Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year B, Part 2
Will Willimon's Year B Part 2 Lectionary Sermon Resource.