

Since this is the first time I had a chance to see most of you since the end of December, Happy New Year! So how is your New Year going? How many times have you written 2009 instead of 2010? The start of a New Year is a time full of hopes, dreams, resolutions and of course questions.

You might think of the New Year as a journey, perhaps a trip over uncharted water. If that is the case, then we can think of God as the “Lord of the Seas.” We don’t know what this New Year will bring, but we do have this promise from God. ***“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.”*** (Isaiah 43:2)

God inspired the Prophet Isaiah to write these words about 700 years before the birth of Christ. At first glance, these sound like strange words to a people living in an arid climate. Isaiah was God’s prophet to the people of Judah, the Southern Kingdom with the capital in Jerusalem. They were not sailors, although their nation bordered on the Mediterranean Sea. Isaiah’s words were a flash back to the time that God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, to the time when God parted the waters of the Red Sea so that they could pass through on dry ground. God was with them then and promised to be with them whenever times got tough, whenever the waters of life got rough.

The people of Isaiah’s day needed to hear that promise since they were certainly facing some rough waters. The Assyrians were the world power of the time and were using their military might to expand their territory. They threatened Judah at least three times, in 733 BC when the neighboring nations tried to force Judah to join their coalition, in 722 when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and in 701 when they laid siege to Jerusalem. God spared the city and promised to help his people.

But the threat to Israel did not go away. Even though the Assyrians did not conquer them, the Babylonians would in the future. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC and took many of the people into exile. But God promised to be with them and to bring them back to their home land. Isaiah wrote, ***“Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.”*** (Isaiah 43:5) God kept that promise.

God promises to be with us in the tough times of life, too. When the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem, God promised through Isaiah to send Immanuel. Immanuel is one of the many different names that describe Jesus and means “God with us.” Jesus is God with us. And God is with us in this New Year, in this time of uncertainty. Because God is with us, we know that regardless of what happens, he will be with us and help us face anything and everything that comes our way. Isaiah tells us, ***“When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”*** (Is 43:2) To put it another way, God will not let the tough times of life overwhelm us because He is with us.

Isaiah tells us two specific reasons why God makes that promise. First we are created by God. We are not some after-thought or an accident of nature. We are created by God, formed by Him. God has a plan and a design for our lives. God tells us through the Prophet Jeremiah, ***“For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*** (Jeremiah 29:11)

God made us for a purpose. But we have to admit that we don't always live according to God's plan. We are guilty of doing things our own way instead of God's way. Because we've turned away from God, we need to be restored. So God not only makes us, He also “redeems” us. God told Isaiah to write these words, ***“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.”*** (Isaiah 43:1) The New Living Translation says that God has ransomed us. He has paid the price for our sin, set us free from death to give us a new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the price for us on the cross. He took our sin upon Himself. He went through the rough waters for us so that He could help us when things threaten to overwhelm us. God has redeemed us and restored us and promises to always be with us.

But God doesn't promise that we will never face rough waters. If I told you that I would be lying. Sometimes we face the rough waters of life because we live in an imperfect world. Romans chapter 8 tells us that creation itself groans because of the curse of man's fall into sin. So sometimes we suffer because nature has gone wild. Other times we suffer because man's human nature has been corrupted by sin and they do evil, destructive, harmful or selfish things. But we also suffer because of our sin, our pride, our rebellion against God. Sometimes God has to discipline us to restore us. But even when He is correcting us, God is with us.

If we think about this New Year as a trip across the sea, we hope for smooth sailing. But that doesn't mean you won't become seasick along the way, or be hit by an enormous wave of illness, the cold wind of betrayal, or a tidal wave of temptation. But we do have the promise that God will be with us. He even urges us to bring all of our needs and concerns to Him. He wants to help us face the tough times of life.

If you are not happy with your life, you have two options; you can either change the conditions or change your attitude. But we can't always change the conditions of life. Some things are simply out of our control. But we can change how we look at things, especially with God's help. If we take off the glasses of doubt and despair and put on the glasses of faith and faithfulness our attitude will change. With God's help, we can pray for those who persecute us, love those who hate us, forgive those who hurt us, and help those around us. God's promise and presence makes all the difference in our lives. Never forget the promise God made through Isaiah, ***“You are honored, and I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you.”*** (Isaiah 43:4-5 NLT) That is good news for all us as we set out on this journey into this New Year. Amen.