

Comforting promises

By [Lawrence M. Stratton](#)

January 7, 2013

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Stratton's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Until now I never appreciated the beautiful message of this week's Old Testament passage. God's promises to Israel—to not be drowned by water or burned by fire—make this text almost as comforting to its readers as the 23rd psalm.

In fact, "Do not fear, for I am with you" echoes Psalm 23 directly—"I will fear no evil: for thou art with me"—along with the ongoing biblical theme of downplaying fear. Although life gives many reasons for fear, Isaiah's command is premised on God's ongoing presence.

Luke's account of Jesus' baptism makes me think that anyone would welcome a declaration from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well-pleased." Isaiah's message—"I love you" and "you are precious in my sight"—actually conveys the same point. And the Acts reading's discussion of baptism of the Holy Spirit conveys how Isaiah's promises to Israel and God the Father's declaration of love to Jesus Christ relates to ordinary people—those in biblical Samaria and in congregations today.

Christianity is not a philosophy from which we draw inspiration by reading incredible texts from the past. It is a faith premised on the metaphysical reality that God is actively engaged in history and our lives even now. As we proceed on our challenging pilgrimages, let's keep Isaiah 43:1-7 in mind.