

**Sermon on Isaiah 41:10 & Joshua 1:1-11
Baptism of Akua Hema Frimpong**

“Do not fear”, sisters and brothers, “for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

These are the words from the book of Isaiah with which we’ve just baptised and blessed Akua.

Georgina, Akua’s mother, thought of these beautiful and encouraging words, when we were sitting round their table in Freising last Monday and planned and prepared for Akua’s great day today.

Akua was with us all the time, while Linda, the theology student, and I visited the family... as were Akua’s sisters and parents.

We wondered together what we would like to give this happy and cheerful child as a message for her life journey... And Akua looked at us, laughed at us, talked to us in her fascinating baby language. Akua – ever so lively, alert and very much awake... Akua will need these words!

“I am with you” – are words spoken to Akua at the very beginning of her life... regarding her life as a journey that she will have to go on. And God will be with her on the way. That is what Isaiah assures us of.

Akua’s life has only just started. And we don’t know what will come along in later months and years.

As parents and as a church family, this can make us curious; it can fill us with excitement or tension. But it can also make us uncertain and frightened.

What is there to come in Akua’s life? What will she experience? What will you, Georgina and Samuel, experience with her? What will it be that we can share with her as a congregation? What will she want to share with us?

How long can you be with her – as parents and family? How long can we be at her side as her church family?

Where will she need our help, our support, our community?

And what is it that we will be able to give – to her and to her family – as we’ve just promised?

Remember?!

**Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith
and life and include Akua in your care?**

**Will you with God’s help proclaim the good news
and live according to the example of Christ?**

**Will you surround Akua with a community of love and forgiveness,
that she may grow in her trust of God
and be found faithful in her service to others?**

**Will you pray for her that she can be a true disciple
who walks in the way that leads to life?**

And we all answered: “We will!”

We do this every time we baptise. Christians all over the world do it... at all times.

Words spoken to us when we were small, or whenever we were baptised. Words spoken to all our children...

As a mother – sometimes – when I try to picture the future of my boys, the time when they are grown up, when they've made up their minds what profession to choose, what girlfriend maybe, when they live their own lives... I am really curious and excited and looking forward to all that may happen.

But sometimes, I must admit, I have my doubts and fears...

Who knows what will happen to them?

So much has already happened... so much we couldn't have dreamed of or chosen.

Not only in our family – I bet that is the case in all our families...

We all experience accidents, we all know poor health, bad luck...

We all know injustice and misfortune...

And we all know that there will be a time when we will no longer be able to protect our children.

What will happen then?

Will there be others to support them?

Will they be able to look after themselves? Cope? Manage? Be reasonable?

Protect themselves? Make wise decisions?

Will it be enough, what we have been able to give to them, pass on to them? Will the seed that we've planted come to blossom and bear fruit? And what kind of fruit?

“Do not fear, for I am with you,” – these words can be a comfort, but they are no life insurance against the dangers of life, against illness or death.

God's assurance “Do not be afraid, for I am your God,” does not spare us or our children from the hard and dark side of life. But it does promise us that God will be at our side and see us through the dangers, toils and snares, as we sing so often in “Amazing Grace”.

God will be with our children. God will keep them and hold them, even in times when they may not want to know him or be in touch with him!

God will walk with them on their life journeys, and he will uphold them and strengthen them.

This is what Isaiah told the people then, and tells us now.

And it needs us to give all our children a chance to learn about God, to be able to experience him and build up a relationship with him.

It needs us –

parents, godparents, family and friends –

people, great and small... to show Akua and all our children what our faith means to us, and who God is for us.

They need to be told what we believe.

Our faith will be mirrored in their lives... will build up their own way of believing.

When we sat together at the Frimpongs' home, we discovered how close Isaiah's words are to the words God speaks to Joshua, when he makes him a leader of his people and shows him which way to go.

Reading through this story in which God calls Joshua into leadership and affirms the old promises given to his people, I realised in what a fascinating line of tradition “faith takes place”. It is not only about me believing, or my children becoming believers. It is all about that long line of people sharing their faith over decades and centuries. This is the line – or maybe better: the network – which we’d all be happy to lead our children into, isn’t it?

In Joshua’s story God reaffirms his commitment to his “old” promise. They had all heard it many times. It was the promise given to Moses: “...every place where you set your foot, I have given to you...” A promise first made to – just remember – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They’d all lived with it. They all walked the paths of their lives with it. They were all motivated and sustained by the promise of land...

God had promised to bless Abraham’s descendants and to bring them into the “promised land”, a rich land, flowing with milk and honey and prosperity. This was the vision that kept them all going – generation after generation – in those many years of wandering. The promise of a home... The promise of a place to stay – a place where they belonged!

And while they still were on their way, God would surely be with them: “As I was with Moses, I will be with you...” Joshua had walked with Moses long enough to have an idea of what this meant. God was so close to Moses, and now God makes the same promise to Joshua, and the people he wants him to lead fearlessly.

No doubt – Joshua is a grown up man with plenty of life experience... Where does his story cross our own life journeys or the paths our children may choose to follow?

A lot of history lies behind Joshua and his people. And yet: after the death of Moses they are there... standing on the bank of the Jordan, somehow ready to cross over... hoping that milk and honey would flow richly on the other side.

And this is the point where the story easily becomes our story: standing at a crossroads with something new lying ahead.

New land in front of us...

...this is so true – also for Akua who is not even one year old. And in one way or another it is true for all of us. However old we are, wherever we come from, whatever our life story is like, more than once in our lives we come to these points like river banks. And then we have to decide and organise how to get through the water and over to the other side.

Often we know so well what lies behind – especially when we are not all that young any more-. We have managed to live through the past, good times and bad...

but we have no idea what lies ahead.

We don’t know what we will have to meet and put up with on the other side of the river. We don’t know what life holds in store for us, for our children, for Akua.

We don’t know.

And sometimes it is good that we don’t know...

The people of Israel had no clue what to expect on the other side of the Jordan. The only thing they knew after all these years of wandering was, that God would be with them. A reliable, trustworthy God who loves his people, who calls them by their names and walks with them. And this is so similar to what we know about the life and future of our children.

Of course we want to believe that it will all be good there on the other side, - only a river away from where we are now.

We want to believe that it is the promised land... milk and honey!

“The country of your future will reach from the mountains to the sea,” the Israelites were told. “There you shall live.”

The message is clear, but just as clear is the assumption that the land ahead is not an empty country. Other people live there already. There is life on the other side of the river. There are families, cities, fields, farms that already belong to others...

This will not all be given to the people of Israel for free.

They can see that they will “have to handle with care”...

that they will have to share...

surely negotiate... maybe fight.

They understand that struggles lie ahead, because the place they are heading for, is already occupied.

This is tough news... challenging definitely – disappointing, maybe frustrating.

But then they still have God’s words in mind, the promise spoken to Joshua:

“When you go, no one shall be able to stand against you, no one will stop you. As I was with Moses, so will I be with you. I will not fail you or forsake you. Just be strong and courageous...”

Is that what we can hear, too, when we look into our and our children’s future?

How much of this future is already determined?

How much of our and our children’s life stories are marked by family history, painful or joyful experiences in the past? By illness, maybe handicaps? All these big and small personal things that we all carry with us?

How much of their future is already determined by the society they live in, the school system they grow up with, the languages they speak?

How much of their future is at risk because of pollution, world politics, injustice, discrimination?

How much depends on a happy family life, friends at your side and your own personality?

And what influence has our status in society, how much we earn and what education we can provide? The colour of our skin, whether we are male or female?

Akua is female, black and beautiful...

One of my children is male, white and healthy through and through...

and the other one is – well – male and white, too, but of more delicate health, and with quite a bit to carry around in terms of life story... and what he had to suffer from and go through...

What lies ahead of them – and so many others?

Let’s pause a moment and think of our children...

What lies ahead of all the girls and boys we raise to be good Christians and faithful members of the world community?

I am not making up problems when I realize that the life and future of our children is not an empty land, but already occupied.

However old they are, whatever they strive for, however they develop, I want to believe that it is the promised land that they are heading for. But knowing human life I see clearly that it will not always be easy for them to enter their promised lands and succeed over there on the other side of the Jordan.

Like the Israelites they will have to be careful and wise. They will have to share and communicate, and sometimes they will have to struggle hard in order to find the place where they belong.

Nevertheless, what they have for sure – and what they will need – just as much as we need it – is God’s promise: “...do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord, your God, is with you wherever you go...”

And what is lying ahead is not all or only struggles and challenges but also God’s grace: God’s grace going ahead of us.

Neither we nor our children, nor our children’s children will take one step that God will not watch over!

“Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you!”

I am already there, says God, with all my love and support. I won’t leave you alone!

Now go on, cross the river... take the next step. Live your lives.

And with your lives – great and small – follow God’s call, and let your guide always be the love of God. Walk in the footsteps of Christ, who welcomed and blessed the children and showed us how to love and... love and love and love again...

Do not be frightened – were words for Joshua and his people, and for countless courageous men and women throughout the history of humankind.

They are also meant for us – you and me, mothers and fathers, families and friends.

And they are words for our children, the Jacobs and Nicos of this world, the Nanas and Yaas, and all the others. And of course especially today they are true for Akua – carried into the promised land of her own little life.

I will be with you – is God’s beautiful promise for your little girl today, Georgina and Samuel; and it is the source of all courage and new beginnings for us, too.

“I hereby command you: do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord, your God, is with you wherever you go!” Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, you watch over us with endless love and care. We thank you for the journey of life and each of its stages. We thank you for childhood and adulthood; we thank you for family and friends and people who cross our paths. May the roads we travel lead us and our children ever closer to you, and may we at all times hear you say: Do not fear, for I am with you... Amen.