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Years ago when I traveled around the country doing curriculum workshops while serving as an editor for our church publishing house, I found myself in New York one weekend to introduce a group of educators to our newly released curriculum, with one workshop in New York City and other in Buffalo.

I recall being nervous about the trip since I had never been to such a huge city as New York City, but thankfully my host met me at the airport and helped navigate me through the subway system to get to our destination. After I completed the first workshop in New York City, my host and I traveled to Buffalo. After the second workshop, my host asked if there was anything I would like to see while visiting, to which I replied that I would like to see Niagara Falls. As I stood there along the edge, watching the water cascade over the falls and feeling the mist dancing in the air, I recall being amazed at such an awesome sight. The words of Isaiah echoed in my ears as I listened to the

thundering sound of the water: “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won’t sweep over you.” Although I would never try to walk through the falls, the fast-paced weekend felt as though I had crossed through a turbulent river.

As I watched the water of the Niagara Falls and felt gratitude for passing through the challenging weekend, however, I never imagined the challenge that Nik Wallenda envisioned: to cross not *through* the waters, but *over* the waters on a tightrope. And this past summer, he stepped out onto a tightrope with a 40-pound balancing pole to walk the 1500-foot distance to cross the Horseshoe Falls. Imagine walking alone across the turbulent waters for 25 minutes, feeling the wind blowing and the cable swaying. His arms began to cramp and his mind began to wander, but to keep his mind focused he began to pray. “I really prayed non-stop,” he said in an interview after the walk. “The Bible says pray without ceasing and I’m always praying.”¹

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When asked why he did the walk, he responded, “To inspire people around the world” and to honor his great-grandfather who was a tightrope walker. And then he offered a bit of wisdom: “I think that’s what life is about. We all go through challenges. But once we get through them, we look back and say look how much our lives have changed by going through that challenge. If you can focus on the other side, when you look back it makes it that much easier.”²

I imagine the people two thousand years ago hearing Isaiah’s words about crossing through the waters may have still felt overwhelmed, for they had a hard time seeing what was on the other side. They had seen numerous wars and invaders plunder their land throughout the centuries: from the Assyrians who conquered the northern portion of their land to the Babylonians who carried away people from the southern portion into exile in a faraway place. Rather than seeing themselves walking on a

tightrope to the other side, they may have felt their lives were more like a tangled mess.

How often do you feel as though you’re either walking on a tightrope, unsure whether you will make it to the other side, or as though your life is a tangle mess? Sometimes in the midst of the tangled experiences of life, we may miss the pattern that God is weaving in our lives, as one writer recalled when reflecting on his childhood years:

When I was a little boy, my mother used to embroider a great deal. I would sit at her knee and look up from the floor and ask what she was doing. She informed me that she was embroidering. As from the underside I watched her work within the boundaries of the little round hoop that she held in her hand, I complained to her that it sure looked messy from where I sat.

She would smile at me, look down and gently say, “Son, you go about your playing for a while, and when I am finished with my

embroidering, I will put you on my knee and let you see it from my side."

I would wonder why she was using some dark threads along with the bright ones and why they seemed so jumbled from my view. A few minutes would pass and then I would hear Mother's voice say, "Son, come and sit on my knee." This I did only to be surprised and thrilled to see a beautiful flower or a sunset. I could not believe it, because from underneath it looked so messy.

Then Mother would say to me, "My son, from underneath it did look messy and jumbled, but you did not realize that there was a pre-drawn plan on the top. It was a design. I was only following it. Now look at it from my side and you will see what I was doing."³

Sometimes our lives are tangled, with the threads weaving through our lives seeming jumbled and confusing. When money is scarce, paying bills seems like a tangled mess. When hearing the

sudden news of an illness or accident, we may find ourselves in a tangled knot of frustration. It's in these times that we may wish we had a tightrope to walk on to get us across the tangled messiness of life, to bypass what seem like tangled and turbulent waters.

And yet, Isaiah reminded his listeners that when they passed *through* the water—not over them—that they were not alone, that God was with them. And I sometimes wonder if that's the same reason that Jesus, hundreds of years after the turbulent waters of Isaiah's time, entered into the running waters of the Jordan River to be baptized.

John the Baptizer had been inviting people to enter into the rivers to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins, to wash away their past and start new lives. But I wonder if Jesus had a different idea in mind when entering the waters. Maybe he recalled those words of Isaiah, recognizing that when passing through difficult waters, God would be with him. I'm sure Jesus was aware of the

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complexities of life, of the difficulty of living in a world filled with violence. By stepping into the turbulent waters, he publically demonstrated that he identified with the struggles of humanity. He recognized that life is messy, and that when passing through the waters, we are not alone.

Luke's Gospel uses the imagery of a dove to describe God's presence with Jesus. Today we might use the contemporary imagery of hip waders, that when we pass through the waters, we feel the protection of God just as one who wears hip waders

feels the protection from the water. While passing through the waters, we are not overwhelmed.

You and I may not have the skill to pass *over* the turbulent waters on a tightrope, but with God's Spirit and presence in our lives, we have hip waders to walk *through* the turbulent waters, knowing that Isaiah's words still speak to us today: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; when through the rivers, they won't sweep over you."

¹ Lauren Sher, "Nik Wallenda Reflects on Historic Niagara Falls High-Wire Walk," June 18, 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/headlines/2012/06/nik-wallenda-reflects-on-historic-niagara-falls-high-wire-walk/>

² Ibid.

³ Author Unknown, "God's Embroidery," www.gagirl.com/stories/Gods-Embroidery.html