

"GOD DIDN'T SAY THAT!"

A SERMON BASED ON THE PROPHECY OF ISAIAH (ISAIAH 43:1-7) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON MAY 16, 2021---ASCENSION SUNDAY AND THE SECOND SUNDAY OF MY FINAL SERMON SERIES FOCUSING ON THE THEMES OF LEGACY AND THE PROMISES OF GOD

DOES THE BIBLE SAY, "GOD WILL NOT GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE"? MANY CHRISTIANS BELIEVE SO, BUT YOU WON'T FIND IT IN HOLY SCRIPTURES..... THIS IS ONE OF MANY QUOTATIONS INACCURATELY ATTRIBUTED TO THE BIBLE.

OTHERS INCLUDE:

“THIS TOO SHALL PASS.”

“CLEANLINESS IS NEXT TO GODLINESS.”

“GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS.”

“EVERYTHING HAPPENS FOR A REASON.”

“LOVE THE SINNER. HATE THE SIN.”

“GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES.”

WELL, GUESS WHAT? *THE BIBLE DOESN'T MAKE ANY OF THESE CLAIMS.*

WE NEED TO BE CAREFUL, BECAUSE THE WORDS OF THE PROPHET ISAIAH IN TODAY'S OLD TESTAMENT READING CAN BE EASILY MISUNDERSTOOD AND MISAPPLIED. *WHEN GOD SAYS THROUGH THE PROPHET, "WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU; AND THROUGH THE RIVERS, THEY SHALL NOT OVERWHELM YOU" (43:2), GOD IS NOT SAYING, "I WILL NOT GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE." NOR IS GOD PROMISING, "THIS TOO SHALL PASS." NO, THE MESSAGE IS REALLY VERY DIFFERENT.*

SOCIAL MEDIA THROWS QUOTATIONS AT US EVERY DAY, AND NOT ALL OF THEM ARE RELIABLE.

THE MOST FAMOUS OF THESE MIGHT BE THE WORDS, “THE PROBLEM WITH QUOTES ON THE INTERNET IS THAT NO ONE CAN CONFIRM THEIR AUTHENTICITY.” —ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

IN 2010 GREGORY SULLIVAN CREATED A WEBSITE CALLED “QUOTE INVESTIGATOR” THAT OFFERS EXAMINATIONS ---OR FACT CHECKS TO USE TODAY’S JARGON ----THE DUBIOUS ORIGINS OF FAMILIAR QUOTATIONS BY YOGI BERRA, MARK TWAIN, MARILYN MONROE AND OTHERS WELL KNOWN PERSONS.....

FOR EXAMPLE....YOGI BERRA IS OFTEN CREDITED AS SAYING, “ALWAYS GO TO OTHER PEOPLE’S FUNERALS; OTHERWISE THEY WON’T GO TO YOURS.” BUT GUESS WHAT? THE LINE APPEARED FIRST IN A NOVEL IN 1876, DECADES BEFORE BERRA WAS BORN IN 1925.

MARK TWAIN IS QUOTED AS SAYING, “THE MORE I KNOW ABOUT PEOPLE, THE BETTER I LIKE DOGS.” A FUNNY OBSERVATION — ONE THAT SEEMS TO FIT THE HUMOR OF TWAIN — BUT CREDIT GOES TO A FRENCH BOOK FROM 1822.

AND MARILYN MONROE? SHE REPORTEDLY SAID, “GIVE A GIRL THE RIGHT SHOES AND SHE CAN CONQUER THE WORLD.”

**BUT THERE IS NO EVIDENCE FOR THIS
QUOTATION. CREDIT SHOULD GO TO BETTE
MIDLER, WHO SAID IN 1985, “GIVE A GIRL THE
CORRECT FOOTWEAR AND SHE CAN CONQUER
THE WORLD.”**

**BOTTOM LINE: MARILYN MONROE DIDN'T SAY
THAT!**

**SO WHAT IS THE ACTUAL MESSAGE OF GOD TO
US, AS IT COMES THROUGH THE PROPHET
ISAIAH? WHAT DOES GOD MEAN BY THE WORDS,
“WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I
WILL BE WITH YOU” (V. 2)?**

THIS SINGLE QUOTATION CANNOT STAND ALONE, LIKE A CLEVER AND HUMOROUS OBSERVATION BY MARK TWAIN. RATHER, IT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EXILE OF THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL.

FOR ABOUT 60 YEARS, THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL LIVED IN CAPTIVITY IN BABYLON, FAR FROM THEIR HOMES IN PALESTINE. THEY WERE FEELING DISCOURAGED, DISPIRITED AND DEPRESSED, WONDERING IF THEY WOULD EVER BE ABLE TO RETURN.

BUT NOW, AS THEIR EXILE IS ABOUT TO END, ISAIAH REMINDS THEM THAT GOD HAS CREATED THEM, FORMED THEM, RESCUED THEM AND CALLED THEM BY NAME. “YOU ARE MINE,” SAYS THE LORD (V. 1). “YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU” (V. 4).

AFTER DECADES OF DARKNESS, A LIGHT IS BEGINNING TO DAWN. THE DEEP DOUBTS OF THE PEOPLE ARE BEING REPLACED BY THE ASSURANCE OF GOD’S CARE AND PROTECTION. ONE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR --- COMMENTING ON TODAY’S TEXT --- WRITES THAT ISAIAH IS PROMISING THAT GOD “WILL BE WITH AND FOR ISRAEL.”

THE PROPHET'S WORDS ESTABLISH GOD "AS POWERFUL AND COMPASSIONATE TOWARD ISRAEL," AND THEY EXPOSE THE FOREIGN GODS "AS IMPOTENT AND IRRELEVANT."

NOTICE THAT ISAIAH IS NOT PROMISING AN EASY PATH FOR THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL, OR FOR US. HE DOESN'T SAY "IF YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS," BUT RATHER "WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS" (V. 2). SWIRLING WATERS WILL COME, RIGHT ALONG WITH RAGING RIVERS AND SEARING FIRES. *BUT IN THE FACE OF ALL OF THESE CHALLENGES, "I WILL BE WITH YOU," PROMISES GOD.*

WHEN OBSTACLES ARISE, GOD WILL BE — IN THE WORDS OF THIS SCHOLAR — “POWERFUL AND COMPASSIONATE” TOWARD US.

ISAIAH NEVER SAYS THAT “GOD WILL NOT GIVE YOU MORE THAN YOU CAN HANDLE,” IMPLYING THAT GOD IS THE SOURCE OF THREATENING WATERS, RIVERS, FIRES AND FLAMES.

AND THE APOSTLE PAUL DOESN'T SAY IT IN HIS LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH. THE VERSE OFTEN CITED IN THIS REGARD IS FOUND IN PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT CORINTH (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13) WHERE HE WRITES:

“NO TESTING HAS OVERTAKEN YOU THAT IS NOT COMMON TO EVERYONE. GOD IS FAITHFUL, AND HE WILL NOT LET YOU BE TESTED BEYOND YOUR STRENGTH, BUT WITH THE TESTING HE WILL ALSO PROVIDE THE WAY OUT SO THAT YOU MAY BE ABLE TO ENDURE IT.”

NEITHER THE ISAIAH TEXT OF TODAY’S READING NOR THE PAULINE TEXT SAYS THAT GOD PULLS US INTO TURBULENT WATERS, PUSHES US INTO THE FIRES OR BURDENS US WITH TESTING AND TEMPTATIONS.

THESE THINGS HAPPEN BECAUSE OF OUR OWN
INEPTITUDE, BECAUSE OF EXTERNAL FORCES
BEYOND OUR CONTROL OR BECAUSE
ADVERSITY IS SIMPLY A PART OF THE NATURE
OF LIFE----THE STATE OF MANKIND

INSTEAD, BOTH ISAIAH AND PAUL UNDERSTAND
GOD TO BE POWERFUL AND COMPASSIONATE, A
GOD WHO IS ALWAYS WITH AND FOR US.

THINK ABOUT THIS: *WITH AND FOR US.*

THIS IS THE GOD WHO WAS WITH AND FOR THE
PEOPLE OF ISRAEL AS THEY ESCAPED
CAPTIVITY IN EGYPT AND PASSED THROUGH THE
WATERS OF THE RED SEA.

**THIS IS THE GOD WHO WAS WITH AND FOR THE
APOSTLE PAUL AS HE PASSED THROUGH THE
WATERS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN AND ENDED
UP SHIPWRECKED ON THE ISLAND OF MALTA
(ACTS 27-28). THIS IS THE GOD WHO IS WITH AND
FOR US WHEN WE FACE TROUBLES OF OUR
OWN.**

**BUT GOD DOES NOT IMPOSE THESE
DIFFICULTIES ON US. INSTEAD, GOD CHOOSES
TO BE POWERFUL AND COMPASSIONATE
TOWARD US WHEN WE ARE IN THE EYE OF THE
HURRICANE.**

AS ISAIAH SAYS, “WHEN YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE WITH YOU; AND THROUGH THE RIVERS, THEY SHALL NOT OVERWHELM YOU; WHEN YOU WALK THROUGH FIRE YOU SHALL NOT BE BURNED, AND THE FLAME SHALL NOT CONSUME YOU. FOR I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD, THE HOLY ONE OF ISRAEL, YOUR SAVIOR” (VV. 2-3).

AFTER HEARING THESE VERSES, SOME MAY SAY THAT “GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS” — EVEN THOUGH THESE WORDS ARE NOT FOUND ANYWHERE IN THE BIBLE.

IT WOULD BE MORE ACCURATE TO SAY, “GOD WORKS IN *REDEMPTIVE WAYS*” — ALTHOUGH THOSE PRECISE WORDS ARE NOT IN THE BIBLE, EITHER.

GOD IS MYSTERIOUS..... GOD IS MYSTERY — TRANSCENDENT AND UNABLE TO BE PUT INTO A BOX OR DEFINED AS WE WOULD LIKE GOD TO BE DEFINED.....

BUT TO SAY THAT GOD WORKS IN REDEMPTIVE WAYS PROBABLY HAS MORE MEANING FOR US.

THIS MEANS THAT GOD IS ALWAYS WORKING TO REDEEM US — TO BUY US BACK, RECOVER US, DELIVER US, RANSOM US, SAVE US.

“I GIVE EGYPT AS YOUR RANSOM,” SAYS GOD THROUGH THE PROPHET ISAIAH, “ETHIOPIA AND SEBA IN EXCHANGE FOR YOU. BECAUSE YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND HONORED, AND I LOVE YOU, I GIVE PEOPLE IN RETURN FOR YOU, NATIONS IN EXCHANGE FOR YOUR LIFE” (VV. 3-4).

IT IS TRUE THAT THE SPECIFICS OF THIS EXCHANGE ARE UNCLEAR TO US — LOST IN THE HISTORY OF THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST.

**EXACTLY HOW EGYPT, ETHIOPIA AND SEBA
FUNCTIONED AS A RANSOM FOR THE PEOPLE OF
ISRAEL REMAINS A MYSTERY TO US. BUT WHAT
IS ETERNALLY CLEAR IS THAT GOD WORKS IN
REDEMPTIVE WAYS, ALWAYS ACTING TO SAVE
US FROM ANYTHING THAT CAN HURT OR
DESTROY US. AS GOD SAYS TO US THROUGH
ISAIAH, “YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN MY SIGHT, AND
HONORED AND I LOVE YOU” (V. 4).**

GOD'S POWER AND COMPASSION ARE SEEN MOST CLEARLY IN THE LIFE, DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS, THE ONE WHOM GOD CALLED "MY SON, THE BELOVED," AND SAID, "WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED" (LUKE 3:22).

- . WHEN JESUS PASSED THROUGH A STORM ON THE SEA OF GALILEE, GOD WAS WITH HIM;**
- . WHEN HE FACED THE OPPOSITION OF SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, HE WAS NOT OVERWHELMED;**
- . WHEN HE WALKED THROUGH HOLY WEEK, HE WAS NOT BURNED;**
- . AND EVEN HIS DEATH ON THE CROSS DID NOT END HIS LIFE FOREVER.**

***ON EASTER MORNING, GOD WORKED
POWERFULLY TO RAISE HIM TO NEW LIFE.***

JESUS IS THE ONE WHO SHOWS US HOW TO TRUST GOD'S WORDS, "DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU" (V. 5). HE INVITES US INTO A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE WHO ARE CALLED BY GOD'S NAME AND CREATED FOR GOD'S GLORY (V. 7). JESUS IS THE ONE WHO SHOWS US HOW TO LIVE A LIFE OF SERVICE TO OTHERS, WITH FAITH IN GOD AND A WILLINGNESS TO PRAY, "YOUR WILL BE DONE, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN" (MATTHEW 6:10). THE FOCUS IS ON GOD, NOT ON SELF.

THESE WORDS ARE THE OPPOSITE OF THE LINE
SO OFTEN TOSSED AROUND IN CHRISTIAN
CIRCLES: “GOD HELPS THOSE WHO HELP
THEMSELVES.” REMEMBER: GOD DIDN’T SAY
THAT! NO, THE TRUTH IS THAT GOD HELPS
THOSE WHO CAN’T HELP THEMSELVES, AND THE
KNOWLEDGE THAT THIS IS OUR GOD — A GOD
OF MERCY, GRACE, FORGIVENESS AND
COMPASSION — SHOULD HELP US LIVE IN FAITH
AND WORK TO ADVANCE GOD’S WILL IN THE
WORLD. WHEN WE PUT OUR TRUST IN GOD, WE
DISCOVER THAT WE ARE NEVER ALONE IN THE
FACE OF THE CHALLENGES OF LIFE.

**NOT THAT THIS ELIMINATES ALL OF OUR FEARS.
A PASTOR WRITES: “I WISH I COULD BE
FEARLESS.....YET I AM AWARE, FULLY, OF ALL
MY FEARS. I FEAR HIGH PLACES AND WIND
BLOWING AGAINST MY FACE. I FEAR FAILURE,
NOT BEING GOOD OR SMART ENOUGH AND
DRAWING CRITICISM. I FEAR THAT MY
WEAKNESSES WILL OVERRIDE MY STRENGTHS.”
AND YET, THIS PASTOR HAS DISCOVERED THAT
GOD IS WITH HER, EVEN AS SHE WALKS
THROUGH THE DARKEST VALLEYS. SHE HAS
FOUND THAT “GOD’S PROMISE IS TO PROVIDE
SUPPORT AND COMFORT EVEN THROUGH THE
SHADOWED VALLEYS OF OUR LIFE.**

**OUR FEARS MAY SHOW UP IN VARIOUS PLACES,
BUT GOD WILL BE OUR CONSTANT SUPPORT.”**

**IN OUR DARKEST PLACES, WE DISCOVER THAT
GOD IS OUR SUPPORT, AND WHAT GOD SAYS
THROUGH THE PROPHET ISAIAH IS TRUE: “WHEN
YOU PASS THROUGH THE WATERS, I WILL BE
WITH YOU. ... DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU”
(VV. 2, 5). OUR LORD HELPS US IN DIFFICULT
TIMES NOT BECAUSE WE HAVE HELPED
OURSELVES, BUT BECAUSE WE ARE PRECIOUS
IN GOD’S SIGHT, HONORED BY GOD AND
ETERNALLY LOVED.**

**PRAISE GOD AND MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND
FOR ME.....AMEN**