

Return to Sender (Half Truths #3)
September 10, 2017
I Corinthians 10:11-13; Isaiah 43:1-7
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/09/sermon09-10-2017.mp3>



In 1962 Elvis Presley made a fairly forgettable movie entitled *Girls, Girls, Girls* in which he sang one of his best-selling songs, *Return to Sender*. I bet that many of you have heard this little ditty, which presupposes a reality wherein one party attempts to give another a message or letter, but the second party refuses, saying that she wants nothing to do with either the message or the one who sent it.



That song and phrase came to my mind as I was considering the theme of this week's message. I don't know about the stuff that you have to worry about when you go into work. I suppose that it's an occupational hazard for construction workers to have debris fall on them, or for a fisherman to fall overboard, or for a nurse to get accidentally stuck by a needle. One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor is that you have to smile blandly through all kinds of terrible theology.

I can't tell you how many times I've been walking with someone through a situation that is simply horrible – a devastating medical diagnosis, the sudden death of one who was greatly loved, the loss of a job... and some well-meaning person comes alongside and says, "Well, just remember... God won't give you more than you can handle..."

And maybe it's because it's September and football season is upon us, but when I hear that I want to get out my little yellow bandanna and yell, "Flag on the play! That right there is a theology foul. You're not allowed to say anything else for fifteen minutes!" Have you heard that one before? In keeping with our

September theme of “Half Truths”, there is something that is vaguely spiritual and maybe even true-ish about this, but really, there are just so many reasons why this phrase is wrong...

Before we get to the theological foul, though, let’s consider where it might come from. Why do people say it, and how might they think that it’s connected to the Bible?



¹When God called the Apostle Paul to share the good news of Christ’s love in Europe, one of the places that Paul went was the Greek city of Corinth. Corinth was an important center of shipping and commerce, and a real “melting pot” of the Roman Empire.

There were all sorts of people with all kinds of ideas from all over the world who had gathered there. In many ways, Corinth was a “Navy Town” – a lot of sailors in and out, many of them looking to have a good time while they were ashore. In fact, in 50 AD if you were to say that someone was “living like a Corinthian”, you meant to imply that they were drunk and promiscuous.

In this context, Paul tries to launch a little church. He writes to those who had come to believe that they are to live lives centered in the holiness of God and the love of Christ. They respond, apparently, by saying, “Um, Paul, do you *remember* what it’s like here? How in the world can we stay faithful in a place like this? There’s no way we can be the kinds of people God wants us to be when we are surrounded by this kind of decadence and decay.”

¹ *Romans During the Decadence*, Thomas Couture (1847)

Paul reminds them that it is possible to say “no”, and that, in fact, “God will not let you be tested beyond your strength...” In other words, the Apostle is saying, when you are going about your daily business, you can *always* do what is right. God will not place you in a position where it is impossible for you to be a disciple.

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And somehow, “God won’t send you to a place where it is impossible to be faithful” has shifted to “Anything that happens to you is from God and he will pull you through it.” That is, essentially, what we are saying when we say “God won’t give you more than you can handle”, right? If you wake up one morning and you have this huge ball of ugliness staring you in the face, this is the “truth” to which many would have you turn: *You have to get through this... after all, God won't give you more than you can handle, right?*

Just think about that for a moment, and then think about this week’s news, or your life. That hurricane that just wiped out your town... That unspeakable event that occurred when you were nine...and eleven...and thirteen... Those cancer cells that are tearing apart your loved one’s brain... Are they “gifts” from God? Did God *send* them to people? Did God *give* them?

If we say that “God won’t give me more than I can handle”, then we’re saying that any and all pain and struggle and dis-ease I might experience is, in fact, a gift from God.

And if hurricanes, abuse, and cancer are sent... do we have the option of simply refusing delivery and saying, “Return to sender....”? Can we say, “That is not acceptable. I want a different life, please...”

I suspect that some of you have tried that strategy. In the words of the famous theologian, Dr. Phil, “How’s that working for you?”

Here's the truth: I often turn to I Corinthians 10 when I am faced with a moral choice, or when I want to give up in the face of adversity. These verses are really helpful to me – as they were intended to be to the original recipients – when I am trying to chart a course of moral behavior in the midst of confusing times. This message from Paul is a great reminder that you and I have the power to choose how we might respond to the situations in which we find ourselves.

But when I need to make sense of a situation in which some part of my world is apparently going to hell in a handbasket, I find that Isaiah 43 is more useful. Here, the prophet is speaking to a group who have witnessed and lived through the unspeakable. They are returning from an exile in a foreign land, and they see the devastation of their homes. They have to be asking themselves and each other, “What’s going on here? Is YHWH really in charge? Or are the gods of Babylon and Assyria more powerful? What has happened? What are we going to do?”

Isaiah begins by anchoring his message in who God is – God is sovereign and mighty. God is the force behind all that is – God is the creator. More than that, YHWH is a God of power. He calls us by name – we do not have to *invent* ourselves, God tells us who we are. And then, after we understand who God is and who we are, the prophet tells us *where* God is. God is *with us*, it says in verse 3. Do you remember the phrase that Isaiah used earlier to describe the presence of God? *Immanuel*. God with us.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and our God – is not a deity who sits on a lofty throne, scoffing at the creation, occasionally tossing lightning bolts at people when they get out of line. Far from it.

In fact, Isaiah names the fears that these vulnerable people have: the rising flood waters, the burning flames – elements that will consume us in a heartbeat – and says, “When (*not IF*) these things happen, I am *with you*.”

Why? Why would YHWH, why would our God, act this way? The answer to that comes at the very center of today's reading, verse 4: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

I want to show you a graphic that I made up while I was studying this passage. I know that it's a lot of words, and it's a little nerdy, but remember that I was an English Major in college, and that you love me. I want to show you how the shape of Isaiah 43 reinforces the meaning.

But now, this is what the Lord says— he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel:

"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior;

I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead.

Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you,

I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life.

Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west.

I will say to the north, 'Give them up!' and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'

Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth—

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

This passage appears to be written in the form of a chiasm – that is, a literary style where there is a key point that is surrounded by a series of mirrored phrases or themes. If I'm right about this, then the core message of Isaiah 43:1-7 is that you are loved and cared for by God – the God who promises to be *with you*, who *calls to you*, and who has in fact created you. This passage starts and ends with the power of God in creation, but is centered on the notion that wherever you are, God is right there with you.

If *that's* true, then, the promise is *not* that "God won't give you more than you can handle", but rather "Whatever mess you find yourself in right now, you can get through, because you are not alone." You can have strength for the battles you fight every day; you can have endurance and stamina for the daily grind; and you can have hope for the days and situations that you cannot yet see.

I began this message by citing Elvis Presley, and suggesting

that there might be times where we wish we could take some portion of our life and mark it “return to sender – no such number...” Perhaps the message of this morning needs to be a reminder that it is, in fact, *we* who are being “returned to sender”. Could that be what is being said in the last few verses of our reading from Isaiah? That God will call all that he has made, everything that bears his name, and that he will give an ultimate place, context, and home to the creation?

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Hear me, people of God – I do *not* want to get all “pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye” on you. I do not want to say, “Oh, come on, you can make it – I mean, it won’t matter that you’re suffering now because heaven is going to be so great.” That is *not* what I’m saying here.

However, we must realize that there is *always* more to our lives, the workings of the world, and the movement of the creation, than we can see. We confess that our perspective is limited and finite, but that God’s is neither. I think that means that we come to worship trusting in the ultimate and eternal intentions of our creator even as we do our best to face the challenges of any particular day.

So to those of you who are feeling as though you are stuck in a place of unspeakability right now – those of you who find that it is difficult to see much of anything in terms of God’s eternal purpose and design... let me simply encourage you to hold God to his promise. Here’s a prayer you can use: “God, you said that you love me. You said that you’d be with me. How are you with me? Where is your love?” Ask God *those* questions.

And to those of you who are not stuck right now, but live in a world that is filled with horrible places, let me encourage you to ask God how you might be an answer to the prayers that his children are calling into the darkness. If you *have* the presence and love of God, you can *share* that love and presence. And when you’re in the grip of terror or pain, sometimes just being with

someone who can bear witness to the presence and love is enough. So please, beloved, ask God where you need to show up in the days to come.

God doesn't "give" hurricanes, or drunk drivers, or abuse. And yet our lives are interrupted by those things in ways that seem horrible. Thanks be to God that God *does* give us each other. And thanks be to God that God *does* promise his love and his presence. May we share those things in abundance as we encounter the trials of this day, this week, and this year. Amen.