

## God Didn't Say That! *Isaiah 43:1-7* | 1/13/2019

“God will not give you more than you can handle.”

“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? *None of these quotes are from the Bible.*

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.

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. 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. Isaiah is promising, according to biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann, 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 Brueggemann — “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 1 Corinthians 10:13: “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. 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.

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”.

God is mysterious. 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.

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, “Thy 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 when facing the challenges of life.

Not that this eliminates all of our fears. “I wish I could be fearless,” writes pastor Yena Hwang in *These Days* magazine. “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, she has discovered that God is with her, even as she walks through the darkest valleys. She has found that, as she puts it, “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. You are loved, and God is with you ... always!

*Pastor Keith*