

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

Sermon

Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church
1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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The Promise of God's Presence

Isaiah 43:1-7

One of those cliché's that I hear from time to time is that God will never give you more than you can handle. Vice President Biden, whose mother died just the other day, said that after his wife and daughter were killed in an auto accident his mother told him, "Joey, God sends no cross you cannot bear." I much prefer to word that differently, to say that God always gives us the strength to handle whatever comes. That is a more gracious picture of God, I think, but there's truth to both sayings. The challenge for us is to recognize God's hand in our daily lives.

The biblical portrait of God clearly shows God as the judge who holds us accountable, handing down judgment intended to correct and transform. The apostle Paul spoke of a thorn in his flesh that God would not heal. "My grace is sufficient for you, God told him, for power is made perfect in weakness." To be sure, Paul called that thorn a messenger of Satan. Nevertheless, he understood that it was God's will for him to bear that cross. He also knew that God's grace would help him do that. In short, that cross wasn't too heavy, and God gave Paul the strength to bear it.

Biblically we see God shutting off the rain to cause a famine in Israel. We see God sending foreign troops to attack and destroy Israel and Judah. We see God portrayed as angry and even punitive. But not every portrait of God pictures God that way, not even the majority of them, and certainly not here in this passage from Isaiah. Here we see God portrayed as loving father, one who says quite bluntly, "You are precious in my sight and honored, and I love you." Here we see God buying back his children from the exile in Babylon. Here we listen in on God's promise to protect, to gather and to save. "Do not fear," God says, "I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters I will be with you... When you walk through fire you shall not be burned. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior."

So what's the deal? Shall we fear God as one who is punitive and angry? That would lead to grudging obedience, it seems to me, certainly not the kind of obedience we see in Jesus or his apostles. Or shall we love God as Jesus did, as a loving parent, one who cares and provides for us? That invites an entirely different obedience, not one born of fear, but one grounded in trust; not a grudging obedience, but one of loving interaction. That's obedience, to be sure, but obedience born of trust and a desire to please, to serve well, to make our loved ones proud of us.

And yet the "But now!" of this scripture, the "But now, that begins the reading, "But now," Isaiah says, "Thus says the Lord." That "But now," can't be understood apart from the "Back then," that preceded it. It refers to the back then of the exile and the bitterness of defeat. The "But now," announces a hopeful future to people who are struggling. Their economic situation is bad. Their faith has withered. Their children may have wandered away, left the fold to serve other gods. The "But now," indicates a change from, "Back then." Now, life is going to be different. Something has changed.

The current Allstate Insurance advertisement on television asks, "Years from now, how will we look back on today... as the Great Recession or as the recession that made us great? When the cars we built became smarter... When the houses we bought were meant for living in, not for showing off... When we remembered that living well meant living within our means." The ad continues, "Allstate has seen 12 recoveries but this one is different because we're different. This was the time we realized our things are not as important as the future we're building with the ones we love."

Did you hear the “But now!” in that ad? But now, something is different; something has changed. Not God, mind you, God is still the same God; instead, something has changed in us. “This recovery is different,” Allstate claims, “because we are different.” Back then we overvalued our stuff. We were materialistic to a fault. But now we see things differently. The recession has changed us. More importantly, although the ad doesn’t make this claim, God has changed us. Now we realize that, “our things are not as important as the future we’re building with the ones we love.” Now we’re different that we were back then.

Back then business was booming, people were moving to Naples every day. The school system couldn’t build new schools fast enough. Our houses were appreciating so rapidly that people bought in desperation to get in before they were priced out. Back then banks flooded our mailboxes with offers of loans at ridiculous terms, suggesting that we use our home equity more wisely. Why, they asked, would you pay \$2,000 or 3,000 a month on your mortgage, when you can pay only \$650 a month and use the rest of the money to buy whatever you want? Even better, why buy a \$300,000 house at a fixed rate, when you can buy a \$800,000 house with a lower monthly payment? And you know what? Some of us fell for that. Many of us got caught up in that craziness. In fact, I suspect we all did to some extent. Because, well... just because that’s the way we were, “Back then.”

But the housing bubble burst. Banks failed. Ostrich sized nest eggs became humming-bird size. And we were panicked with fear. Federal, state and local governments built huge deficits. And our nation was divided over the wisdom of that. Politicians that used to pride themselves in working together, started seeking to destroy those who with whom they disagreed. Accusations flew and tongues wagged, and “I hope you fail” became a rallying cry.

Well, I don’t need to go into the details. Like the Hebrews of Isaiah’s day, we’re looking back on a very difficult time. But the surprise is, Isaiah wants us to see God’s hand in all that. “Who gave up Jacob to the spoiler, and Israel to the robbers?” Isaiah asks. “Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey?” Yes, even the recession and all the resultant problems can be understood as God’s judgment against us and the way we were living, “Back then.”

It’s not over yet. But now, we’re wiser now, or at least many of us are. If that advertisement is correct, the recession has changed us. If Isaiah is correct, God who plunged us into recession because he loved us, that same God is now assuring us of a new life, a new relationship with God, based not on fear, but on trust. We’re no longer prisoners of sin, but freed men and women, free to live in confidence and hope. The “But now!” of Scripture announces that we have suffered long enough. We have learned our lesson; and we have been changed. Rather than an indicator that God is somehow against us, we’re invited to see it as a sure sign that God loves us and is for us. God has not given up on us, but disciplines us precisely so we will turn and be saved.

We’ve been changed by the recession. We’ve altered our spending and improved our saving. And that’s what God wanted us to do. Whether or not the recession makes us great, will I suppose, be answered in the future. Not all people will recognize God’s hand in the economic crisis. Not everyone will agree that God was mixed up in all this. But those who do will embrace a different life-style. Will... because of what we have learned, will we become more ecologically wise? Will we choose to be more frugal and also more generous? Indeed if we are freed from spending so much on ourselves, and if we trust God to watch over us, we will be free to give away more of that which God has entrusted to us. Yes, that’s a stewardship message, and yes we will be asking for your pledges and estimates of giving in a few weeks. I suppose that’s when we’ll begin to see if this recession has really changed us, if it has really made us great. I think it has, and I look forward to the future God is opening up before us. Don’t be afraid, God is present with us and has brought us through troubled times, that we may live hopefully and generously now and in the future.