

2019

The Words We Need to Trust

TRUST
yourself
TO THE
Lord
WHO MADE YOU.

Claremont United Methodist Church

Rev. Mark Wiley

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The Words We Need to Trust

First Sunday after the Epiphany

Isaiah 43:1-7

Sermon by Rev. Mark Wiley
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Claremont United Methodist Church

Dear friends, thank you for the applause last week. I shall always remember. I have been blessed by you. But in some ways, the applause last week makes what I am about to say so much harder. For health and family reasons, I need to retire at the end of June. I know many of you are stunned, not ready.

I'm so glad you applauded last week instead of now!

I know many of you would want me to stay longer. Even the Bishop has asked me several times if I am sure. Part of me wants to stay here longer, too. You are the best congregation. Part of my heart will always be here.

But I am older than many think. I was at retirement age last year. Truthfully, I have not bounced back enough from my own heart attack. Both my energy and my drive have not recovered. My body is running down faster than any of us wanted.

And to be honest, you know it's time to go when the family gives you the brand new Apple i-Watch for Christmas, not because it's cool or the latest technology, but because it has an EKG machine built in. Dear friends, it's the right time.

The Staff Parish Relations Committee is already in conversation with the District Superintendent. They will announce the new pastor when the appointment is made. I know now doesn't feel like the right time. But once I looked at today's scripture, I knew it was.

These are my scriptures. Today is the only place they appear on the entire three-year lectionary. They are my favorite, the best, the ones that shaped and empowered me. These are the ones I base my whole ministry on. These are the ones to remember long after I am gone. Isaiah 43.

And if that wasn't enough, I told the staff that we were not going to talk about the baptism of Jesus. Jared had chosen two possible anthems, both dealing with the baptism. So he changed the anthem. He chose *The First Song of Isaiah*. He didn't know that this was the song the choir sang at our wedding.

Friends, we are surrounded by God's choreography. We don't know the next chapter in the story. I have no plans, though Jan and Marjorie have informed me that I am writing a book.

In the meantime, we still have some things to do, some adventures to go on. And the thought occurred to me that maybe we haven't seen anything yet! I haven't really thought about it yet, but since I am retiring, what trouble can I get into now? Before we get into real trouble, before we think what that might be, let's turn to scripture.

The setting is the worst scenario you can imagine. Israel lost the war against the Babylonians. The Babylonians tore down the walls that David and Solomon built. The wall may have lasted 400 years, but it was rubble now.

But the Babylonians didn't stop with tearing down the walls of Jerusalem. They destroyed the Temple. They established a puppet government. They dragged the top leadership of the nation to concentration, or internment, camps in Babylon. They gutted the nation, the religion, the city, the leaders. They left the people with nothing to define themselves as a nation.

And years go by. A generation goes by. 40 years go by. There is no end in sight. It must have felt like death upon death. It must have seemed as if God had abandoned them. Then, a prophet arrives with a word from God.

Do you believe it? Can you trust it? Can you give your heart to it? Will you let its truth give you the hope you've lost?

Isaiah 43

"But now, thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the floods, I will be with you;
and 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.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.
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.
Do not fear, for I am with you.'"

Aren't these the verses we've been searching for our whole lives? Aren't these the words we have ached in our souls to hear? We are precious, honored, and loved. We are rescued, ransomed, and redeemed. We are not alone, not on our own. These are the words of God.

We all have bad stuff happen in our lives. Some of it we cause. Some are caused by someone else. Some are caused by disease, or accidents. Some are totally beyond our control. It doesn't matter the source. Every tragedy, sorrow, disaster, even every undeserved death, every unresolved injustice undermines our faith, weakens our voice, and gives voice to our sagging spirits.

We keep looking for the reassurance. We keep looking for the God moment, the epiphany that we can stand upon. As I said last week, we need to be on the lookout for the epiphany, the God-given moment when everything shifts, and we see things clearly. And we do have to keep looking.

But until that moment happens, and truthfully, even more so afterwards, these words are the words we can trust.

It's odd. I went through half of my ministry without ever finding or hearing these. Maybe it's because it's in the Old Testament. We don't look in the Old Testament to find these kind of words. We are too busy looking in the New Testament to find them. Maybe it's because it's buried in Isaiah, or because it sounds more like historical language.

But the deep truth is that there are no other texts in scripture in which God is as personal, or as declaratory about how God cares for us.

It's not just that we personally need reassurance. It's not just that we need forgiveness from what we know we have done wrong.

The word of the Lord is being invoked by all kinds of folks, each of whom has made God into mirrored reflections of themselves. God has been turned into something partial, tribal, bigoted, prejudiced, and punitive.

We know in our hearts that God loves us, but it's hard to stand up and face the barrage of bad theologies, harmful words that now pass for the faith.

But here, here are the words that give us the voice to give authority, to add substance to what we believe. Listen. These are God's words.

I created you. I made you. Do not ever be afraid, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by your name. You are mine. I will be with you in every storm. You will not sink nor drown. And when you walk through trials of fire, you shall not be burned or scorched, or consumed by the flames.

I am the Lord your God. I have chosen you. I have ransomed you. I have set you free. **You** are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear. I am with you always.

Who among us has not been in trials we thought would destroy us? Who among us has not had a crisis of identity, wondering if anyone really cares about the real person we are? Who among us has not been lost, or felt abandoned and alone? Who among us has not felt unloved, unappreciated?

And these words, these words embody the grace that we need to let soak into our souls. There is something deeply powerful in these verses.

We usually hear the promises of God as something that happens in the future. One day, by the grace of God, with God's help and mercy we will be saved, make it into heaven. Hooray. But that's not what Isaiah 43 says.

It does **not** say, "One day, we will be redeemed." It says, "I have redeemed you." We are already saved, rescued, and redeemed. What is also not spoken here are any words of condemnation, or punishments,

or conditions, limitations, strings, or fine print. There is no fear, no guilt, no shame. This is the voice of God revealing God's own heart to us.

This is what God says and does, believes and feels. Here, I think is the deepest truth of scripture, the words we can trust, the words we can build our faith upon, the words we can carry with us in every single storm. We belong to God. God has redeemed us.

Lin-Manual Muranda, who wrote *Hamilton*, went to Puerto Rico to fundraise for the damage caused by Hurricane Maria. He even joined the cast in a production of *Hamilton*. It was his gift to his home.

CBS News went to Puerto Rico to interview him. Part of what they did, as a surprise to him, is they tracked down his eighth grade English teacher. It turns out that Lin-Manual Muranda had turned in a musical instead of an essay in eighth grade. Of course he did.

And the teacher wrote on that essay, "You are good at this. Quit hiding in my class. Get out of here and go to the drama club." I think God is like that teacher.

Salvation has already come to your house. You are already cherished and loved by God. Quit hiding behind fear and shame. Get out of here, and help somebody else. Write a musical, save the world. "Don't worry about the future," God says. "I've got it covered. You can have zero fear. I am with you. You are mine. I have redeemed you." Amen.