



“SPECIAL SAUCE”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 43: 1-7; ACTS 7
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
Sunday, January 9, 2022, Online
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 43: 1-7

43:1 But now thus says the LORD, God who created you, O Jacob, God who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.

43:2 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.

43:3 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.

43:4 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.

43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you;

43:6 I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth--

43:7 everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

Acts 8:14-17

8:14 Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them.

8:15 The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit

8:16 (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus).

8:17 Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

The Word of the LORD.
Thanks be to God.

Back in the day of three channels on TVs. When younger siblings served as remote controls because remote controls didn't exist. When there was no such thing as a cable box or HBO. When TV shows were events with captive audiences across the country and across social contexts—the TV commercial jingle was born.

If you lived back in those frontier days of TV watching you probably remember a few:

Play 1970s Commercial Jingle Video

For some of us those jingles are forever lodged in our psyches—we remember those jingles more easily than we remember what we had for dinner last night. That's what jingles do—they embed themselves in our bodies in a way that gives them staying power even across years and years.

Here's another one you might recall:

Play McDonald's Commercial

The McDonald's special sauce—and the ingredient that makes the Big Mac special. I don't know if I ever ate a Big Mac (I would get two cheeseburgers with no onions when I went to McDonalds back in the day) but I remember the song about the Big Mac and its special sauce.

The special sauce was its signature—then the recipe came out and it was really just French dressing with some pickle relish in it. Not that special after all. And yet, McDonald's sells somewhere around 550 million Big Mac's a year. That's a lot of special sauce!

Things take hold in our minds, in our hearts, in our appetites. We don't always know why, but they do and they shape our behavior, our aspirations, our desires—our relationships, our communities, our hopes and dreams, our identities.

This deep formation that lives in each of us—these are the threads we hold on to when the going gets tough, when we are wandering in the wilderness, when we are not sure where we belong or where we fit.

That's part of how jingles work—they make us feel like we have a personal relationship with a brand or a product. Like it is especially for us—like it's an old friend—someone we can count on when everything else is hard to trust.

Isaiah's prophetic poems and admonitions were for people in exile—a people who had been conquered by a nation that was not theirs. They had lost their cultural bearings—the landmarks of their daily lives—homes, neighborhoods, marketplaces, workplaces, places of worship. They had lost their identity as a cohesive people with beliefs and practices that framed the rhythms of their lives.

Isaiah wanted them to remember some things—he repeated them so that they could commit them to memory. Their exile was not a rejection. They were not orphaned or abandoned by their God. Isaiah repeats over and over again about God's fidelity and Isaiah repeats over and over again that they do not need to be afraid.

That's the jingle he wants them to remember—the special sauce—you are loved, don't be afraid, God is with you.

There's something so yummy about this passage "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 43:4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you ... 43:5 Do not fear, for I am with you."

It's music to our ears even if we struggle to really believe it.

But then there's this other stuff in the passage—this stuff about other nations being exchanged for us, this stuff about other peoples being given up for us. That doesn't feel so yummy to me. Why does God's love for me, for us, need to come at the expense of someone else? This prophet's voice was speaking into a world of conquest and oppression—this prophet was looking for language that resonated. In a world where political and violent dominance is what makes things happen, believing God's power is the biggest dominator of all makes sense, but it doesn't feel like something I can believe in.

That might be the scariest prospect of all—that God is like that—that God picks and chooses, loves and smites. Blech! I don't want that kind of love. It feels like an abusive boyfriend or abusive parent—who bargains and uses domination and manipulation to control you. I don't want any part of that!

At the same time, I walk around every day knowing I can never fully grasp the way God's presence and power works—God's love, so central to my days, is, in the end, a mystery to me.

Whew! Can we go back to the warm and fuzzy Coke song? "I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony."

The faith tradition we are heirs to is complicated. Scripture is a constant reminder of that complexity. Every beautiful moment can be matched with something not so beautiful. Scripture is constantly in conversation with itself—often contradicting itself—meandering through hard to swallow moments and then in the next moment telling us the opposite thing is true.

And our siblings in Christ can take the same passage that calls us to the work of mutual liberation and hear a call to insurrection.

The Acts passage is one of many in the Acts of the Apostles that clearly communicates the universal nature of the Christian faith. Christ does not prefer some nations over others—

Christ does not love you and me at the expense of someone else. The fact that this moment in our passage today was in Samaria is a huge part of that song of inclusion—Jews and Samaritans looked askance at each other’s practices and scriptures and beliefs. They were enough alike to be judgmental of each other. They were enough different to despise one another.

Here we see the emerging communities of Jesus followers finding their way in a new mode—not defined by political or national or cultural boundaries. Jesus followers were not defined by ethnic identity, but by this new realization of a shared human identity—we are God’s people—that goes for all people.

Sounds really yummy, right—a faith for all people.

But the yuck is not far behind—Christianity’s capacity to cross cultural boundaries has been distorted into a mandate to destroy cultures. That distortion took hold early in the infancy of our faith—when the empire said the Christian faith was its faith—when empire realized extracting and appropriating the power of the Holy Spirit was their most effective course of action to stop the way following Jesus was changing people in ways that were not benefitting the empire.

We can’t ignore the yuck, because we want to see ourselves on the side of right. The very thing that makes Christianity about freedom has been what has made it about oppression, too. When humans start to play God—then the whole idea of the image of God in each of us becomes a very dangerous song indeed. The very power that is supposed to bring us together as a human family becomes the thing that tears us apart.

On either side of this moment in Acts are power struggles in the face of the Holy Spirit’s capacity to change people and situations.

The stoning of Stephen in chapter 7 and Saul’s persecution of Jesus followers. And Simon, the magician and Phillip, the evangelist, both moving around in community teaching people. Simon focuses on miracles, Phillip on profession and confession. People saw both change people.

When Simon is baptized and then the power of the Holy Spirit is introduced into the picture, Simon is looking for a way to capitalize on it. Can he purchase the capacity to share that power with silver? His ministry was popular among people—they believed he was magic, he wanted that Holy Spirit power, too.

It comes clear that the Holy Spirit can’t be purchased, can’t be bought. What has staying power is not magic, but testimony of transformation.

The Holy Spirit is the special sauce, not magic or even miracles, not a commodity. The special sauce is the power in Christ-centered community for lives to be changed, transformed and hearts and bodies to be healed.

Back to the complications of our faith tradition. Just when we feel like we can grab onto something true—something that we can count on—like the power of the Holy Spirit, we are confronted once again with the dissonance that this very passage has generated in Christian communities all across this planet.

Human beings seize on the message and try to create hierarchies—our baptism is better than your baptism. We have the Holy Spirit at work in our baptism, but you don't. Wars have been fought, lives lost, over who “owns” the power of the Holy Spirit.

I wonder how the Samaritans felt at the time—they had been baptized after all, but then they heard they needed a laying on of hands, too. Then they could be legitimate.

It's hard to know what this could all mean—both for them and for us.

And like good Presbyterians we like to run right to our brains and analyze and explain the complexities away to fit our needs, to calm our fears.

We've learned so many of those habits by heart—like commercial jingles for mainline Christianity.

But maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit isn't about everything making sense or everyone singing in perfect harmony. Maybe, just maybe, the Holy Spirit is way more powerful and mysterious than any one line of scripture or any one way we like to feel about God or Jesus or church.

If the Holy Spirit is our special sauce—the ingredient of our faith that gives our faith integrity, that connects our faith to God's hopes for us—then we must be honest with ourselves that the Holy Spirit is who, every day, empowers us to die to our delusions and be born anew of a way of life that is not bound by culture or country.

And right now, this world, this country, this community—the human race—we are struggling mightily with really receiving the Holy Spirit into our lives—we are struggling with this capacity to fully and freely be loved and love.

Grace Covenant, I don't have an easy jingle for you today. But I do have a testimony. Jesus did not live and die for us so that we could deny what he tells us about Divine Love. Jesus' own followers should not be the ones who forget who we are or how we got here.

I am the pastor of this church because the Holy Spirit is very persuasive. I am not the pastor of this church because it's a job. I am here because I believe in Jesus—a man who walked in our shoes, a man who sought out a prophet named John who was baptizing people into a practice of repentance and rebirth. I believe in Jesus, God in the flesh—humble and bold, compassionate and courageous—healer and fellow sufferer who understands.

Jesus is why I am here. And the Holy Spirit is how I am here. Jesus is why I don't give up on life or give up on church or give up on any of you. Jesus is why I don't give up on myself or this world or the people who are the hardest for me to love.

The special sauce of our life together is our willingness to follow a vulnerable savior who doesn't promise us safety or comfort or ease.

Christ promises us truth and Christ promises us freedom—he promises us the freedom to love and be loved. And he kindles in us—in the likes of us, the capacity to believe that our freedom only rings true when everyone is as precious to us as we are to God.

Thanks be to God.