

Rev. Dr. Anne B. Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
October 30, 2022  
Psalm 46:1-3  
Mark 2:1-12

### **“Half-Truths: God Never Gives Us More than We Can Handle”**

“I know you’re going through a tough time right now. You feel like you’re sinking. The burden is too heavy. You don’t know how much you can bear. But it’s going to be all right. You’re going to make it through. Remember, God never gives us more than we can handle.”

I suspect all of us have heard some variation on those words. Perhaps someone has said them to you when you were in the midst of a trying time. Perhaps you said them to someone else.

No doubt people mean well when they say those words. They mean to sound encouraging. They certainly don’t intend to place obstacles in the path of someone’s faith.

Yet the idea that God won’t give us more than we can handle is a ½ truth, if it’s even that . . . and we need to delete it from our vocabulary.

When we say “God won’t give you more than you can handle”, we’re inferring that God has given us all this bad stuff – like school shootings, a war in Ukraine, hurricanes that destroy communities - and while we may not possibly understand the reason why God would give us whatever difficult and painful things that are happening in our lives, God gave them to us – but don’t worry, God will stop giving you more suffering before you reach your breaking point.

Friends, we should think twice before suggesting that God wills these things to happen to us. As I’ve preached before, this isn’t a theology I subscribe to. I get, sort of, why people want to believe that there’s some sort of cosmic purpose behind events because on the whole people prefer a powerful God to a vulnerable God, but at best it’s a ½ truth – if it’s even that.

In doing some research for this sermon back in September, I came across a story about people who made small choices that ended up saving their lives on 9/11.

One of those persons was Elise O’Kane, a flight attendant who normally worked Flight 175 from Boston to LA, the flight that struck the North Tower. When she was scheduling her flights a month before 9/11, she accidentally inverted two code numbers that put her on a flight to Denver instead. The night of September 10, she was still trying to get on the LA flight, and almost did, until the computer froze on her, locking her out of United’s system. After 9/11, she suffered survivor’s guilt.

"Why me -- out of all those wonderful people?" she asked. "What have I done? I'm not a saint or angel."

When colleagues learned O'Kane was not on board, they swarmed her with tears and hugs and saying like "God has a plan for you." "You were meant to be here."

"That was the hardest part," O'Kane said. Although her colleagues meant well, she became frustrated wondering what grand, mystical plan God’s had in mind for her.

Did God have a plan for O’Kane that prevented her from being on Flight 175? Some would say yes. But if you’re going to say that, you have to be willing to say the same about the people who were killed on Flight 175 . . .that God had a plan for them too – a plan that resulted in their deaths. A plan that left husbands without wives, or wives without husbands, or children without a parent; a plan that resulted in the deaths of the people in the North Tower that then affected those families, and so on down the line. That’s some cosmic plan. And maybe there is a plan, maybe you’re right. But for now, I’ll choose to believe in a vulnerable God whose heart was the first one to break when those people were killed instead of one so powerful as to make it all happen. Because I just don’t believe that God is in the business of giving us bad things to handle.

The closest scriptural basis we can come to suggesting God does is the story about God and the devil making a deal to see if Jesus will succumb to the temptations put before him. What we find in those stories is that Jesus didn’t succumb to those spiritual tests. He withstood those temptations. Therefore see, some people would say, God did not give Jesus more than he could handle.

But that's only ½ the story. In every temptation Jesus let the words of scripture guide him, not the devil. He used the tools God gave him to withstand the temptations the devil threw at him.

Friends, the promise of scripture isn't that we won't be tempted or go through difficult times. All of us face temptations and All of us go through difficult times . . . times when we ask, "Why, Lord?" But perhaps the better question to ask during times of adversity isn't "Why", but "how". As in, How can I help?

The promise of scripture is not that we won't go through hard times. And It's not that we can handle everything by ourselves because We can't. What scripture promises is that God wants to be our help and strength, and that often God's help and strength is witnessed to by others who offer to help. As I read somewhere recently, rather than saying "God will never give you more than you can handle" maybe we should say "Let me come over and help you with the laundry." Because life can be hard, and when the dirty laundry piles up, and we can't sort it let alone wash it, we need help to get it done.

Earlier we heard the story about 4 people who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus so the friend could get help. But when they got to the house where Jesus was staying, it was so crowded they couldn't get the stretcher the man was on into the house.

Now, notice what the friends didn't say. They didn't say, "God won't give you more than you can handle," and then leave their friend to fend for himself. Instead, they climbed to the roof of Simon's house, hoisted their paralyzed friend up onto it, and then lowered him through the roof. These men were determined that Jesus would heal their friend, and they were willing to tear the roof off Simon's house to see that it happened.

Can you imagine Simon Peter looking up as dust began to fall from the ceiling, seeing the four men pulling off the roof to lower their friend? I can imagine him roaring in anger, "What are you doing to my house!?"

But everyone needs stretcher bearers like these—friends who will carry you when you are at your weakest, friends who not only will pray for you but will do whatever it takes to help you get back on your feet.

Folks, life is not only messy but it can be painful. And what we need to get through the messes of life can be complex, and yet ever so simple: we need people to come alongside of us, to help clean up the mess while we are in the midst of darkness. And the good news is that's where Christ meets us. Notice Christ didn't find the paralyzed man at the end of the story, he met him in the middle, the mucky middle.

Because most of us, at some point or another in our lives, will find ourselves mucking about in the messy middle, grappling with thorny issues and unsolved problems. Rancorous relationships that remain stuck in destructive patterns. Or Bodies that fail us; or physical wholeness that eludes us. Often we cannot yet fold up the mat and gladly walk, skip, dance or run home. So we need people to be our stretcher bearers, and we need to be stretcher bearers for others.

I recently read a story about a man who was suffering from a rare liver disease. He needed a transplant, but knew that only 1/3 of those needing livers would receive them. The others die. He wrote this:

*In the aftermath of that nearly paralyzing news, I was awed to find spiritual companions gathering around me, bringing great blessing. Their faithfulness lifted me, carried me, toward the Healer when I couldn't find my way alone. A wise counselor helped me quiet my spirit, so I could listen to and cherish my errant liver, instead of feeling betrayed by its failure. A faithful spiritual friend guided me toward the rich promises of scripture and the written wisdom of the saints. Many folks joined in continuing prayers for healing. Together, each in his own fashion, they have buoyed me up and continue to transport me into the transforming presence and healing power of Christ. ("Twice Healed", Douglas R. Loving, Christian Century Magazine, Feb. 2-9, 2000)*

Friends, the whole truth is that *God will help you handle all that you've been given. God will help you handle all that you've been given.*

Which may not sound all that different from the ½ truth, but it is. Nowhere does it suggest that God gives you adversity but stops just short of your breaking point, or that God is the cause of your suffering. Instead, it acknowledges that when you go through trials and tribulations, God walks with you through it all. It affirms what the psalmist says, that "God is our refuge and strength, a help always near in

times of great trouble. That's why we won't be afraid when the world falls apart, when the mountains crumble into the center of the sea."

And I believe that. I believe it with all my heart, because I've seen it to be true. Pastors have a sacred vantage point from which to view peoples' lives; we witness people going through unbelievably difficult times and sometimes we wonder "will they make it?" But time and time again we see they do; with help from God and from the people God brings into your life. I have seen life come from death, I have witnessed resurrections, and watching them I have learned to trust that when bad things happen during the course of life, God sustains us, walks with us, holds us close, and comforts and cares for us.

The apostle Paul once write to the church in Rome:

*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

He wrote those words while he was in prison in Rome awaiting his execution. They sustained him during that time, and have sustained others throughout the centuries – that no matter the persecutions we face, nothing can separate us from the Love of God found in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

I want to close with a short poem written by Annie Flint more than a century ago. She lived through great challenges and heartache, and wrote poetry at the end of her life in the "hope of helping others who were undergoing the kind of challenges with which she was so familiar."

This is her poem "What God Hath Promised":

*God hath not promised skies always blue,  
Flower strewn pathways all our lives through;  
God hath not promised sun without rain,  
Joy without sorrow, peace without pain.*

*But God hath promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the labor, light for the way,*

*Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy, undying love.*

Friends, it's not "God won't give you more than you can handle", because that's just a ½ truth. The whole truth is "God will help you handle all that you've been given."

Amen.