

Not Too Good to Be True

In this current situation and state of affairs in our world the old saying about “deals’ being too good to be true is often heard on the news given on TV, on the radio or even in the newspaper. It is a constant refrain of warning about the “scams” which are so prevalent around us. These offers are often found on the internet or given by telephone...so much so that the warning seems almost constant to not give out personal information lest your identity might be stolen through these tidbits of information. The title for this sermon comes is borrowed from a sermon preached by Rev. Alan Brehn in 2013 because the message contained in that sermon is one we need to embrace...especially in the midst of the message which comes at us daily from the world. He began his remarks by referencing Karl Marx which seems at first a very strange beginning as Marx’s is well known for his unfavorable opinion of religion. He called religion the “opiate of the masses.” He is widely considered as an enemy of faith, but viewed in another light he could be considered a very disappointed idealist. Anyone raised on scripture’s teachings as found in the prophets’ words and then looking at our broken world could find reasons to be disillusioned. The Hebrew prophets’ words consistently give words promising justice and peace and freedom. We still read those words and look around us only to see injustice, violence and oppression prevalent in our world. Many of the ideas which Marx espoused are actually found almost verbatim in our scriptures. Unfortunately he took them out of their original context of faith and turned them into a formula for violent social upheaval which caused even more suffering. The passage we read from Isaiah 43 today is a good example to illustrate this. Isaiah promised the people, in the Lord’s name, that even if they had to go through floods, they would not be overwhelmed or if they had to go through fire they would not be burned or consumed by it. On the surface these are definitely statements that sound too good to be true. Those people who heard these words were living in exile. In their point of view the flood had already overwhelmed them; they had not only been burned but consumed as they had lost everything...homes, lives, land even in some cases all their family. I think the mistake we make when reading these words is we think and want to believe that the Scriptures promise us God will bring us through the flood and the fire unscathed. But the reality we all know is that in a flood, you will get wet; and going through a fire even if you don’t get burned, you will smell like smoke. The promise in our scripture is that hardships will not consume us. This is not a promise that we will not suffer. The promise is that the hardships, flood or fire will not destroy us. Isaiah 43:1—“But now says the Lord, he who created you, he who formed you: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” In this sentence Isaiah recalls the very beginning of God’s relationship with humanity, specifically Israel, but in reality all of us. The use of the words created and formed recall the creation narrative—the Hebrew verb root here is the same as that in Genesis 1 where God created heaven and earth; the root of the Hebrew word for formed here is identical to the verb used when God formed the first humans from the dust of the earth. God created human life and has been actively forming or shaping it throughout the narrative we have received. These verbs also tell us of God’s taking and forming the slaves from Egypt to become God’s people. God has not only made a claim upon them, but also a commitment to them. This commitment is revealed in the second part of that sentence where God’s message is that people have been “redeemed” and “called.” The relationship of being named and claimed is deep, but it also

comes at a cost—being claimed reflects God’s choice of the people for God’s purposes. This passage affirms that God’s people are precious and beloved. That the calling is for all people is shown by the wide range of directions from which God’s call to come and join the community is made. The use of sons and daughters also alludes to the comprehensive nature of the call—everyone is included as shown by the last verse in this passage—“everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.” This passage is positive and comforting. Since these words were spoken to a people still in exile, we don’t want to trivialize them by applying them too freely to ourselves but if we keep in mind the difference in scale, they still can remind us that God’s purpose is to form and make us, to redeem and restore us for citizenship in God’s own realm. Believers in every generation have seen in fire and flood all that is larger than ourselves; all that can consume not only hope but life and limb as well. Yet all Scripture, including this passage from Isaiah can transform these elements from threats into sources of healing through adversity. In the final analysis—into the despair felt by those in exile, came a preposterous word—neither fire nor flood will separate the exiles from God and God’s saving acts of grace. The passage does not promise there will not be fire and flood, but rather that they will not be faced alone. The passage states clearly: do not fear for I have redeemed you; I have called you by my name, you are mine. So is everyone who is called by my name, whom I have created for my glory, whom I formed and made. When we come to the baptismal font, that is what we celebrate: God has claimed us; the claim is made before we can know the meaning, but because God has claimed us we need not fear either flood or fire because we will not be alone. In the gospel passage for today we have Luke’s narrative about Jesus’ coming to the River Jordan and the baptism there. Luke’s narrative begins with the questions in the minds of those who came to the Jordan to be baptized by him. John was clear that his call for repentance and baptism with water were not to be confused with what the “one who came after him, but who was before him” would be doing. The people have been expecting and looking toward the time when God’s anointed would come and redeem them. John is clear he is not that one, but the one who was also expecting the arrival of one more powerful than he. His understanding was this would mark the separation of peoples into groups like wheat and chaff were separated on the threshing floor—the wheat to be saved, the chaff to be burned. Luke’s narrative of the baptism does not exactly tell us by whom Jesus was baptized only that he was. It also adds that as he was baptized he was praying. It is at this point that “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” John called people to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in order to be part of the coming new world—the kingdom Jesus would proclaim near. Repent is to turn away from complicity with the old age and its values and behaviors and to turn toward the coming realm. Baptism gives us the assurance that our final destiny is no longer determined by the brokenness of our world. We have been formed into a community anticipating the realm of God’s creating and forming. Jesus, at his baptism, took a stand in the water of the Jordan to be on our side. Jesus represents the pivotal point that God is now taking steps through the ministry of Jesus to signal that the turning of the ages long expected has now begun. The voice from heaven (God’s voice) identifies Jesus as God’s own son, in whom God is well pleased. In the first century context, these words have less to do with the nature of Jesus and more to do with his purpose. God has

shown Jesus as divine representation in the final transition from the old age to the new...to the forming of the community which will serve God's purpose, which is to bring justice to the nations—where justice refers to the qualities of life similar to those of the reign of God—communities with covenantal support for all. The mission exemplified in the teachings of Jesus is to redeem people from being ruled in the present by the brokenness of the old age. Being baptized empowers people to become part of the movement towards the new world; to invite others to join in the movement; to work the signs of the new age and to embody the qualities of the realm in their common life. This empowerment through the Holy Spirit is a sign that God is present now and always to lure the world towards the values and practices that more fully reflect the characteristics of God's reign. In this frame of reference, people still need to repent of complicity with brokenness and to join in community with one another and with God in the movement towards a better world. That God is still at work creating and forming us into the beings God designed us to be—the called, named, redeemed beloved who live according to the ways of the kingdom Jesus proclaimed near. This is the good news we have received—it is not too good to be true—it is the news which will allow us in faith, to live and help bring into the broken world the reign of our Lord as envisioned by the prophets of old. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.