

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Do Not be Afraid to Witness to Love
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Isaiah 54:4-8; Luke 2:15-20

For five days in elementary school my best friend did not save a swing for me on recess. Samantha and I had started the tradition to swing the whole recess together when we were in the same class in 2nd grade. In 3rd grade we were in different classes, but our teachers were friends so they would take their classes to recess at the same time so they could talk, so we still had many of our recesses together. Whichever of us got to the playground first grabbed two swings and waited for the other. Samantha was my friend because she was a great listener. She remembered everything! I loved that characteristic about her.

On day one I ran to the playground and found Samantha swinging but no other swing for me. I assumed there wasn't another one available so I said hi and went to play with another group (which we would do from time to time). The second day again, no extra swing and I started to feel hurt. I was also hurt that she didn't stop swinging and come play something else with me.

By day five I was crushed. I thought my friend had abandoned me and I had no idea why. The pain and fear and sadness of abandonment ate me up all weekend. On Monday I delayed going outside as long as I could before my teacher dragged me out. I sat on a bench waiting for recess to be over.

When it was time to line up Samantha came over to me to ask what was wrong, and I broke down crying. She listened as she always did and it turns out another friend of ours had told Samantha I was sick of swinging. This friend had done this to get the saved swing Samantha had saved for me on day one. Samantha, the good listener, listened to our mutual friend and gave up the swing.

My fear of abandonment prevented me from asking questions about why she hadn't saved me a swing. For five days my fear forced me to assume the worst. I assumed she was acting out of character and was purposely excluding me. My action of not engaging made the lie of the mutual friend seem real to Samantha, and we went a week without talking about the problem.

If I would have taken a moment to remember her true character it would have dawned on me something wasn't adding up. If I would have thought about the reason I trusted her as a friend was because she always listened, I might have convinced myself to talk to her earlier.

Checking behaviors with someone's character is a good ground rule. Even when it comes to God this rule is a huge help. God's character does not change. We can depend on God to be God in every situation. This is why scripture is so valuable. It tells us what God's nature is. God is love. Where there are good fruits, God is there too. There is no height, nor depth, nor death, nor life, nor angels, nor government, nor things present, nor things to come that can separate us from God's love. This is the character of God in every interaction with humanity from the beginning to now. We can depend on God to never change.

There is one slight problem though, what do we do then with scripture like this: "For a brief moment I abandoned you, In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you." If God is love, what do we do with that?

There are two camps of thought for this problem. One is to see and read those words literally. This leads to the theology that God at times does abandon us, that we can be separated from God.

The other way to read passages like these is to pause and remember God's true nature. The nature that the rest of the Bible tells us about (love, good fruits, no separation) and ask the question, "Why does this seem to be a moment where God is acting out of God's normal character?" The answer for Christians who think this way is, we are not interpreting the situation correctly. There is something else happening around the text, in the con-text. Con as a prefix means "with" or "thoroughly" so when we take into account the con-text we are reading thoroughly and WITH all the meaning it encompasses.

When we run into scripture like this we have a choice. Completely ignore all the verses that talk about a loving God and any experience in our personal lives of God's love and affirm what this verse says...that God abandons us at times, OR look at this verse again through the lens of the knowledge that God's true unchanging nature is love.

The eight-year old me will encourage you to use the second option and save yourself a weekend of tears thinking your friend hates you.

I took the latter option and went to my personal library of commentaries to see what biblical scholars say about this passage. You know what they all said? Nothing. They jump from verse 6 to verse 9. EVERY SINGLE ONE!

I went online and found one reason why no one has cared about this hole in our discussion, this section of scripture is in the lectionary once every three years. And even then, it's one of six verses that a preacher can choose from. No one wants to talk about these verses. So naturally that's all I want to talk about.

Let's look at the rest of this Isaiah passage first, the part scholars do write about. The metaphor being presented is of a young bride who does something to be ashamed of and it causes her to be cast aside by her first husband. BUT then God steps in and redeems her. We know a bit about this process of redeeming and see it play out in the book of Ruth. In that book Boaz is the redeemer and he sees value in Ruth even though she is a widow. He has to go to a few different places to get the okay to marry her. Leaving Ruth alone to worry about what is happening. Boaz does end up getting all the approval he needs, thus taking Ruth out of a dangerous, lonely, and disgraceful situation and placing her in a situation of honor.

We can totally see where God's nature shines in this part of the passage. God is love. God sees Israel disgraced and ashamed and God steps in to redeem them. Then we get to verse 7 where God says God abandoned us. Verse 8 God turns their face away from us. It does line up with the majority of scripture which tells us we cannot be separated from God. It does not line up with my own experience with a God whose nature is love. So we stop, affirm God is a loving God by nature, and give the passage another read.

With the lens that God's true unchanging nature is love, suddenly to me, these words stood out: "...with great compassion I will gather you" or as it reads in other translations, "...with great compassion I will bring you back." Sounds a lot more like the God I know but now I am wondering about the grammar.

If God was the one who stepped away, then saying God is "bringing us back" does not make a ton of sense. Shouldn't it say, "I will come back to you?" God moved away and God will come back. Not God moved away and WE will come back. When I looked at the Hebrew for this, it was translated correctly. God moves, "abandons," and then "brings" us back to God.

I'm a visual learner, let me show this another way. God moves, and then God brings us back. That is what is happening here. God is bringing us back into a new situation. A turned face then is God turning to look for the better situation and moving there to then turn to us in everlasting kindness and pull us forward into the new situation with God. Bringing us out of the place of shame and into the place of honor like the redeemer from the rest of the verse. The metaphor continues on but if we are too quick to read these words and hear "abandon" and allow our fear to shut us down we miss the fullness of the image Isaiah is presenting.

God is a God of love, there is nothing that separates us from that. And if we feel abandoned it could just be that God is beckoning us to join them in something new.

Unfortunately, the fear of abandonment is a strong deterrent. There is a trend right now on tiktok where two people are walking and one of them stops to see how long it will take the other person to notice they are walking alone. I saw one where the partner is wearing thick winter gloves and slips their hand out of the glove so the person walks off holding an empty glove thinking it contains the hand of the person they are walking with. Sometimes these people walk a long way. Blocks.

From one perspective, the person who stopped abandoned the one who kept walking. But someone watching might think it's the other way around. If someone sees one person walking away from the other they might assume the person still walking forward has abandoned the person standing still.

Who has abandoned whom? If God is going forward and we are standing still, it hardly seems fair for us to then cry out, "Why did you abandon me?"

But we do this all the time. We feel abandoned by God when the reality is God is reaching back for us to catch up. The Christmas story celebrates God moving. God moves to earth. And that movement causes lots of people to feel abandoned. Elizabeth and Zechariah thought God had abandoned them. Mary feared Joseph would abandon her when he found out she was pregnant. Joseph thought Mary had already abandoned him so he should call off the wedding. The sheep must have been looking around for their shepherds thinking we have been abandoned.

The reality was that God was already blocks ahead of them with a situation that would change the world. Elizabeth and Zechariah's son would proclaim the coming of the Lord. Mary and Joseph would raise the Son of God. The shepherds would come back with amazing stories and renewed hope. Christmas celebrates God's moving and how those moves redeem humanity.

This year has been...fill in the blank with whatever you want. You may very well have felt abandoned by God a few times. Maybe you still feel that way. But the promise in Isaiah is that God is a redeemer which means wherever God went is the place we need to move to. Wherever God is we need to listen to the call of being brought back so we can be with God again.

The place where we were this time last year is NEVER going to be the right place to be again because God is moving us forward, redeeming us into something we were not ready for last year. This year has been a forging fire for everyone. That is not something that happens often. We all have personal experiences of forging fires that strengthen us and burn off impurities, but those happen at different times in everyone's life. EVERYONE has been through the fire this year. This shared experience will change us, if we are willing to move forward. We will never and should never be who we were last year because God is not there anymore. God has abandoned that place and is calling us back into something new.

This Christmas is a reminder that where God is, it is a place worth being. Scripture says God is where we see the fruits of the Spirit, where we find **love, joy, peace**, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control is where we find God. Those places will be different than they were a year ago.

Let's not sit in the comfortable fields with our usual evening of sheep chewing on grass. God has abandoned that place in order to redeem us. Let's go see where God is and be brought back into something completely new.