

WHEN THE BALL DROPS: Life-Giving Relationship with Christ

Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

January 12, 2025 | Year C

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/when-the-ball-drops-life-giving-relationship-with-christ/

I.

Over the holidays, many of us return to our favorite Christmas movies - *Elf*, *A Christmas Story*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, or *Die Hard*. No debate on that last - it's a Christmas movie.

Many consider *Home Alone* a classic. It tells the story of 8-year-old Kevin McCallister, who is accidentally left behind when his family goes overseas for vacation. At first, he loves his freedom, but when two bungling thieves, Harry and Marv, target his home, he defends it with clever and comical traps. Along the way, Kevin learns the value of family and forgiveness.

One of the more moving themes in the film comes from Kevin's mom, Kate. Wracked with guilt, she faces endless obstacles but never gives up trying to get back to her son. Kate even hitches a ride with a polka band to get back to him. Why? Because Love shows up.

Perhaps you've seen love show up recently, maybe during this week's winter weather. Possibly, someone helped shovel your driveway or checked in on you. Some men from our Friday prayer group picked up and delivered two older women to our shelter for the unhoused. The women weren't guests but volunteers for the overnight shift from 11 pm–5 am. Their car wouldn't start. The women had an easy out to stay home warm and safe, to sleep in their beds, but they chose to serve anyway. Why? Because love shows up. Why did our prayer group give a ride to these ladies they didn't know and then return the next day to shovel their driveway and sidewalk? Because love shows up.

Maybe you recall a parent or youth worker cheering you on during a game or event, a friend sitting with you after you received hard news, or someone offering forgiveness when you needed it but didn't deserve it.

Many of us have stories of times when people showed up in love —probably more stories than we realize.

But for some, love hasn't shown up as it should. We can be honest that some people struggle to think of ways love has shown up for them—maybe in the past, the present, or ever. In this sermon series, we're discussing the epidemic of loneliness in our world. Nearly half of the population struggles with loneliness. Loneliness is harmful - emotionally, mentally, and even physically, more damaging to our bodies than smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Our relational God created us to be in relationship—not just with our Creator but with others, too. God not only made us for relationships; God wants to be in relationship with us. God didn't just create us for a relationship and then move on from us. God shows up because Love shows up.

II.

Isaiah 43 speaks to a people in exile—taken away by force to live in a different place under a different people. Exile was more than a bad case of homesickness. For God's people, the land was their spiritual foundation and center—it was everything. All those years in Babylonian exile were more than a national crisis—they were a spiritual crisis. They questioned everything about who they were and who God was. They questioned whether God was still with them and wondered if and when love would show up.

But in their darkest moment, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 43 is beautiful poetry with images and symbols meant to touch the parts of the human soul that are often hard to reach. But what stands out most in today's passage is the candid communication from God to God's people. In Isaiah 43, we encounter a personal God—a God who gets straight to the point, delivering four profound promises to the exiled people, promises that continue to resonate with us today:

Do not fear.

I am with you.

I will lead you through this.

I love you.

III.

An Iraq War veteran returned home, struggling with trauma and guilt, as many veterans do. Seeking escape, he isolated himself on a remote property far above the nearby town. He rarely ventured into the city for over a decade except for groceries and occasional VA visits.

But one day, the man came to a pastor's office, deeply troubled because the church's steeple had been removed. The pastor explained that it was temporarily out for repairs but would be back up by the end of the month. Sensing more than an inquisitive community member asking about a church steeple, he asked the visitor where he was from. The man responded: "I'm from exile, pastor. Exile."

He didn't know how things could ever return to how they were before the war. He lived feeling disconnected and distant. He came from a place of isolation, where people wonder if they ever truly belong anywhere and if anyone cares.

But every morning, he'd look out from his tiny home on a hill away from everyone, and there, shining in the sunrise was that church steeple with a cross on top. For over a decade, that cross reminded him that someone understood his pain, someone saw him, and someone would see him through. That simple, daily spot on the horizon kept him going. That steeple was more than a symbol to him — it was a lifeline.¹ It reminded the man in exile of the promises of God spoken by Isaiah: "Do not fear. I am with you. I will lead you through this. I love you."

IV.

The first of these four promises—"do not fear"—is repeated at least sixty times throughout the Bible. It was spoken to the Hebrews as they stood before the Red Sea, to Mary when an angel delivered astonishing news, to the disciples caught in a storm, and to the faithful gathered when the Holy Spirit first arrived. Every moment God's people face uncertainty, danger, or a frightening future, the message has remained unwavering: Do not fear.

And why? We find the answer in the second promise: I am with you. In verse 1, God says, "I have called you by name. You are mine. I am with you." (v. 1)

Preacher Fred Craddock shares a story about a boy from the Smoky Mountains near Gatlinburg, Tennessee, who grew up without a father and carried the stigma of it everywhere he went. Feeling like an outcast, he attended a small church, captivated by the preacher but burdened by shame that made him believe he didn't belong. He would listen to the sermon and leave before the service ended—until one Sunday when the preacher blocked his exit.

The preacher placed a hand on the boy's shoulder and asked, "Whose child are you?" Terrified, the boy froze. Then, the preacher's face lit up with recognition. "Ah, I know! You're a child of God. Yes, I see the resemblance!" With that simple declaration, the boy's life changed. He left church that day knowing who he was and whose he was.ⁱⁱ

God says, "I have called you by name. You are mine. I am with you."

The reassurance we need in exile comes from knowing that the one who tells us not to be afraid, who remains with us through everything, is the same one who will lead us through it all.

That veteran from the earlier story shared with the pastor that for over ten years, each morning, as he secluded himself in his small house on the hill, gazing at the city in the distance, he was reminded of everything he was trying to escape.

Yet, one thing in the town always captured his attention, something he sought out daily—the cross. The cross was always there—through every season, on his most challenging days and darkest moments. Every day, that cross reminded him that someone understood his pain, felt the weight of his struggles, and could see him through. Knowing this gave him the strength to face each new day.

Do not fear. I am with you. I will lead you through this. And I love you. A few years ago, a nationwide poll asked participants what word or phrase they most wanted to hear someone say to them with sincerity. The third most popular answer: Supper is ready. The second: You are forgiven. The first phrase people most want to hear someone say to them is "I love you."ⁱⁱⁱ

Out of the thousands of words in our Bible, only here in this Isaiah passage do we find God quoted as saying the three words we most long to hear spoken to us: I love you. It is as intimate and personal as you can get: the God of the universe comes to God's people in our time of exile and tells us, above everything else, that God loves us.

V.

God's Love is the foundation of our faith. God's love is what we find in Jesus, God with us, Love among us.

If you feel disconnected and distant or wonder if you'll ever truly belong anywhere or if anyone cares, hear this: God loves you. From your place of exile, hear the promises of God – Do not fear. I am with you. I will lead you through this. I love you. From your place of loneliness, see the hope and power of the cross, the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us. All of us.

In Luke's Gospel, we see Love showing up again and again in the person of Jesus. John the Baptist has been preparing the way, calling people to repentance, to turn from serving themselves and follow God completely. The crowds wonder if John might be the long-awaited Messiah come to set them free, but John points them to someone greater: "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 3:16)

And then, Jesus shows up. He steps into the Jordan River not because He needs repentance but to identify with us. He steps into the waters with sinners, signaling that God's Love knows no bounds. As Jesus comes up from the water, a voice from heaven declares, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). And in this week's reading from Isaiah, God proclaims to us, "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." (Isaiah 43:4).

V.

Like the man on the hill who isolated himself from the world because of shame, guilt, and pain, we often hide from God those places within ourselves where we most need God's healing touch. We do not allow God to be with us where we feel most alone for fear that there might be a limit to God's love and grace for us.

But the God of the universe comes to God's people in our time of loneliness and tells us, above everything else, that God loves us. And for all that we've been through and are still going through, for all the uncertainties and frustrations of life, for all the disappointments and "what-ifs," for all the anxieties and fears, for all our struggles with loneliness and wondering if Love will ever show up again, God says to us:

Do not fear.

I am with you.

I will lead you through this.

I love you.

I invite you to take a moment to recognize where you might feel exiled, isolated, or disconnected. Is there a part of your life where you feel unworthy of God's Love or have trouble accepting that God is with you, even in your struggle?

First, right where you are, in your pain and uncertainty, trust what God has said is true for you. God is with you. God loves you. It can be as simple as repeating these four promises as a centering prayer throughout your day, asking God to show you God's presence and comfort in the places where you feel most alone.

Second, reach out to someone in your life who might be experiencing loneliness or isolation. People in your circles of influence need to hear and experience the truth that Love shows up for them. You might be the person God intends to use to show them God is with and loves them. You might be the person God calls to move heaven and earth to let someone know Love shows up for them just as it shows up for you. Hopefully, you won't have to hitch a ride with a polka band to do so, but it might be fun. Memorable, for sure.

"Do not fear. I am with you. I will lead you through this. I love you."

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ Steve Lindsley, *Be Still and Know That You are Loved*. Sermon, March 21, 2021. The approach of the four promises also comes from this sermon.

ⁱⁱ Craddock Stories by Fred. B. Craddock (Chalice Press: St. Louis, 2001), pg. 156-157.

ⁱⁱⁱ James A. Harnish, "Walking With Jesus: Forgiveness," Tampa, Fla., March 22, 1998.