

INSCRIBED ON THE PALMS

Isaiah 49:8-17

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on May 25, 2008, Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Memorial Day Weekend, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

From time to time we are enriched when we hear language that differs from our normal, everyday conversation. Such language reminds us that when God chooses to pay a visit to us, God lifts us out of the normal and everyday into a holy realm. I invite you to listen with ears of the heart to ancient language from the prophet Isaiah, speaking on behalf of God, translated into English through the obscure beauty of the King James Version of the Bible.

Thus saith the LORD,

In an acceptable time have I heard thee,
and in a day of salvation have I helped thee:
and I will preserve thee,
and give thee for a covenant of the people,
to establish the earth,
to cause to inherit the desolate heritages;
That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth;
to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves.
They shall feed in the ways,
and their pastures shall be in all high places.
They shall not hunger nor thirst;
neither shall the heat nor sun smite them:
for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them,
even by the springs of water shall he guide them.
And I will make all my mountains a way,
and my highways shall be exalted.
Behold, these shall come from far:
and, lo, these from the north and from the west;
and these from the land of Sinim.
Sing, O heavens;
and be joyful, O earth;
and break forth into singing, O mountains:
for the LORD hath comforted his people,
and will have mercy upon his afflicted.

But Zion said,
The LORD hath forsaken me,
and my Lord hath forgotten me.

Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?
yea, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee.
Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands;
thy walls are continually before me.
Thy children shall make haste;
thy destroyers and they that made thee waste shall go forth of thee.

The language of Isaiah holds that God acknowledges the unmitigated human suffering we experience as creatures.

In the opening section of this divine speech, God acknowledges “the desolate heritages”: the “hunger,” the “thirst,” the “heat” and “sun” that “smite” so many people in so many places across the earth.

In Friday's *Washington Post*, an article appeared acknowledging the toll of disasters we have witnessed in recent weeks – the cyclone that hit Burma May 3 followed by the earthquake that shook China May 12, leaving over 187,000 officially dead and many more injured, missing, homeless, diseased.

The article also spoke of the less generous response Americans have made to these recent disasters than to those of a few years ago. So far we have contributed \$57 million dollars in relief, compared to \$433 million contributed within the first five days of the tsunami in southern Asia and Katrina and Rita along the Gulf Coast.

Among the causes posited for our less generous response:

- \$4 a gallon gas
- Economic downturn
- Distrust of the governments of both Burma and China
- “Disaster fatigue.”¹

We do become numb to disasters, to repeated news of devastating loss across the world. By way of evidence:

- How many of us still follow, on a daily basis, stories coming out of Darfur?
- It is infinitely more interesting for us to speculate as to when and how Hilary Clinton will end her quest for the presidency, and who among his guests in Arizona this weekend John McCain is really considering for Vice-President than it is to follow the natural and human disasters across the earth.

We tire of the mass suffering of others, “the desolate heritages” of humanity.

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Yet in this passage, God not only acknowledges these “desolate heritages,” but also claims to know and watch “them that are in darkness.”

We in Alexandria may not live in a “desolate heritage,” at least a public one, but we know the “darkness” of which God speaks and claims to know.

The darkness God describes begins as that of the prisoner of war, the one kept on hostile soil, a military darkness. Some in this room have known this particular darkness. Just as God earlier acknowledges knowing the cosmic darkness of natural disaster – “the desolate heritages” -- God acknowledges familiarity with *this* wartime darkness, and it leads us to conclude that God acknowledges other darkness as well, darkness closer to home.

- The darkness of adultery
- The darkness of divorce
- The darkness of grief
- The darkness of shame
- The darkness of never being accepted
- The darkness of never accepting one's self
- The darkness of addiction
- The darkness of being a victim
- The darkness of being a predator
- The darkness of overexposure on My Space or Facebook or You Tube – or on the chattering lips of peers of any age.

God acknowledges as well the darkness of diagnoses:

- Leukemia
- Vocal chords not yet working
- Congestive heart failure
- Anorexia
- Dual diagnosis
- Parkinson's

¹ *The Washington Post* 5/23/08.

to name just a few, that have settled in on good and just people in our congregation in recent months – no less fury visited on the one than that on the many by natural disaster, warfare, genocide.

“The desolate heritages,” “the prisoner” of war, “them that are in darkness”: “Thus saith the Lord, in an acceptable time have I heard thee...and will have mercy upon [the] afflicted.”

II.

As part of God’s mercy, as part of God’s promise of relief from our darkness, we yearn to be remembered. To be remembered by friends. To be remembered by family. To be remembered by the “holy men” and “holy women” who stand before us in the chancel, by the “holy friends” next to whom we sit in our pews. We long to be remembered by God and God’s children.

The archaic and beautiful language of this passage promises such remembrance.

God speaks:

Can a woman forget her sucking child,
that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb?

When men father children and abandon them, it doesn’t make the news.

When men turn on their children, inflicting violence or death, it makes the news, but we have seen it often enough that we shrug our shoulders, engage in high-level excuse-making, as if to say: “Boys will be boys.”

But when a woman abandons her children, or turns on them, it is all over the papers. It fuels Nancy Grace’s breathless judgment. How many times are we going to see Brenda Jack’s mug shot in the *The Washington Post*?

“Can a woman forget her sucking child....?”

Well, yes, God says, “they *may* forget.”

Not very often. Not easily. Not unless pushed to madness by no heat, no light, no running water, no sleep, no clean diapers, nothing but sour milk in the now warm refrigerator.

Under such circumstances, God says, “they” [a miniscule few] “may forget” the children at their breasts; “yet will I not forget,” saith the Lord. “Will I not forget thee.”

III.

“Behold, I have graven thee on the palms of my hands.”

The title of this sermon is “*Inscribed on the Palms.*” It comes from the *New Revised Standard Version* – the English translation that best combines accuracy with accessibility.

But King James translates “inscribed” as “graven.” “I have graven thee on the palms of my hands.” “Graven” is stronger, more personal.

In the past decade or so, the tattoo industry has exploded in this country. Young people, and not so young people, from all walks of life have had inscribed names of lovers, sports teams, pets, religious symbols, astrological signs in any number of places on their bodies. Most are hidden from parents and grandparents, except at the pool or the picnic. Others are inscribed in places not appropriate to mention in this setting.

In our encounters with tattoos and those sporting them, or in the careful placement of your own tattoo, have you yet met anyone with a tattoo on the palm of the hand? The skin in the palm is as sensitive as any skin on our body. It hurts to tattoo the palm of the hand. “Yet, I have graven thee on the palms of my hands” – both of them.

IV.

Finally, “thy walls are continually before me.”

The walls referenced in this passage are the walls of Jerusalem, Zion as the holy city is often called. The promise is that God will never forget the walls of Jerusalem, no matter how many defeats she experiences, no matter how much “desolation” comes upon her from her enemies. “Thy walls are continually before me.”

Though there is no exegetical connection between the walls in this passage and Memorial Day in the United States, I see a literary connection.

The first time I saw and visited the black, granite wall of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial was in 1990. Ironically, I was in Alexandria to conduct a wedding of friends at the Old Presbyterian Meeting House. It was at my first time in Washington. Between rehearsal and wedding responsibilities I had time for one tourist visit and chose the recently-opened Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial.

In addition to the more than 50,000+ inscriptions and the hundreds of people finding names familiar and beloved and stenciling those names on paper, I saw a middle-aged man, dressed in faded army fatigues, with shoulder-length hair and peace symbols on American flags stitched into his garments. And I saw standing with him a neatly clad military officer, both of them facing the wall. The two began to embrace, not just a modest family hug, but a holding each other tight, a not-letting-go, a sobbing, and a consoling. I assume they were mourning a name on the wall beloved to them both.

- We inscribe names we honor and remember on headstones.
- We inscribe names we honor and remember of on plaques and memorials and monuments.
- We inscribe names we honor and remember on programs we hand out at our weddings.

At the black granite walls of the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, we re-inscribe the names of those we honor and remember, using lead pencil on whatever paper we have with us, to carry their name back to the place from which they have come, to place their name in frames for mantels and for elderly relatives unable to travel, or to carry their name forward with us wherever we go.

We inscribe and *we* remember.

Yet our holy God does even more than inscribe. God engraves. God engraves in the palms of his hands the name of every human being lost in tsunami, lost in Katrina, lost in Burma, lost in China, lost in Darfur, lost in 9/11. God tattoos where it hurts. An inscription that can never be removed, an engraving that can never be forgotten.

Graven on the palms.

Amen.