

January 28, 2018 – Journey worship

TEXT: Isaiah 49:8–16

TITLE: Inked on God

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

Recently, in *Relevant*, an online magazine, I read an article entitled: “What to do When You Feel Far from God,” written by Jade Mazarin—a Christian counselor, who wrote the following:

“Years ago, I went through a period of severe depression after I started my graduate program. I was deeply lonely in a new city. God felt far away. I sobbed at not even being able to feel God, but I reminded myself He was there and kept communing with Him with all my heart. After many months of daily seeking, I started to feel His gentle presence often.

Jade continued: At various times in the Christian walk, God can feel like a close friend, or like some vague figure in the distance. Most of us will go through times at both ends of the spectrum.

“Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people and will have compassion on his suffering ones!” This song of praise and thanksgiving appears in the middle of the recommissioning or job description of a servant, called to confirm to Zion that God’s plan of release, restoration and return to their home land will come to pass. This absolutely is a time to sing praises to the God of their salvation, God who has brought them through enslavement, wilderness wandering and exile in foreign lands.

But Zion isn’t really feeling the love!

Zion feels very far away from God, she feels that God has forgotten and forsaken her. She is still in exile, far from home, the temple and all she holds dear. Zion, still under the dominion of another people—feel she has nothing to sing about or proclaim from the highest mountains. God’s comfort and compassion is far from evident.

Zion lodges her complaint: “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.”

Now we can be a fickle, faithless and forgetful people—especially when we feel that God is not working things out on our behalf. We offer complaints when we don’t get the position we’ve applied for; we offer complaints when the person we love doesn’t reciprocate that love; we offer complaints when the material things we desire are not attainable. We offer complaints when life doesn’t seem fair or align with the timeline we have created for ourselves.

And yet, there are some complaints that are appropriate and legitimate: when sickness or disease overcomes our bodies; when death knocks on our door; when the vulnerable are abused and misused; when people with the least are treated as disposable or

unworthy; when people looking for safety, sanctuary and a better life are characterized as criminals; when those who have been elected to serve don't! Those are complaints that can't be overlooked, discounted or swept under the rug, and that call us as the people of God into action—to become and be the blessing, not sit back idly when those complaints arise.

Legitimate and appropriate complaints cause us to wonder, where is God and why doesn't God respond, move or put an end to suffering, disease, inequality, political malfeasance? That question has been asked for centuries by people who are in relationship with God, and rightfully so. As being in relationship with God gives us the position to honestly question and call on God and trust that God won't be angry.

Zion's complaints are not grounded in frivolity, but in the painful reality of exilic life. We can only imagine that's exactly how people hailing from Africa, brought to this country so many years ago felt. Yet they found the strength to endure a system put in place to use, abuse, and discard them as nothing more than an expendable commodity. Longing for their native land, family and all that they held dear, like the Hebrew boys in the furnace, they remembered their God and knew that even if God chose not to save them, that God was able and could do so.

Conversely, Zion was complicit in her exile, as it was a direct result of her disobedience to God over and over again; running after other Gods and ways of life, her disregard for her faithfulness and covenantal relationship with God. God didn't respond to Zion's complaint as an angry parent in a harsh or scolding manner or by pointing a proverbial finger at her hardhearted, faithlessness. God lovingly answered her with a question: "Is it possible for a mother to forget her nursing child or to forget the child she carried in her womb?" God continues: "Even if she does. I will never forget you; you are inscribed on the palm of my hand." Take that thought in and let it wash over us. We are inscribed, tattooed, inked on the palm of God's hand. God has not and cannot ever forget us. God knows each of us by name; God has counted the numbers of hairs on our head; God knows our wants, needs and transgressions. God loves us.

Beloved, God's eternal remembrance of us was made evident when Jesus' hands were nailed to the cross. With each strike and blow of the hammer, our names were being engraved on Jesus' flesh and forever imprinted in his divine spirit. So, whenever we feel the need to complain that God has forgotten us, when we feel isolated and alone, when life is overwhelming and answers are few, remember Jesus promised to never leave nor forsake us; remember all of God's marvelous acts towards us; remember God's continued faithfulness towards us.

Brothers and sisters, we are inked on God's palm; we are forever engraved in the flesh of Jesus; and we too bear the mark of being God's own, indwelled with the Holy Spirit which is inscribed in our spirit and keeps us forever and ever.

Amen