

The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
February 27, 2011
Isaiah 49:6-16a
“Written on the Palm of God’s Hand”

Cass served three years in prison on drug charges then found himself homeless upon his release from jail. As he tells his story to bestselling author Mitch Albom ^[1], it didn’t take long for him to turn back to the drugs that led to his incarceration. For five years he lived in abandoned units of the housing projects in which he had grown up, until he met Pastor Harry Covington. Pastor Harry himself had been a drug dealer and a convicted criminal, who himself committed his life to Christ behind a row of garbage cans outside of his New York City apartment where he hid one night to guard his home and family against the retaliation of those he had just robbed. But now, Pastor Harry handed out free food on the roof of his car. He held a barbecue for anyone who was hungry in the empty lot beside his home. And when Cass stole some food that was donated to the church, Pastor Harry told him to take more if he was still hungry. When someone stole the copper pipes in the unit in which Cass lived, flooding the apartment and destroying all of Cass’ few earthly possessions, Pastor Harry invited him to move in with his family until he got back on his feet. “That kindness saved my life ... I truly believe the Lord has given me a second chance on account of this man.”^[2]

In our Old Testament lesson for this morning, Isaiah announces a second chance for God’s people, Israel. The years of Babylonian exile are almost over – God is sending God’s people back to the Promised Land. The words of the prophet promise that God will make way for their return: ensuring security, providing for their needs, even leveling mountains so that nothing will stand in the way of their return home. “Come out! Show yourselves!” God says. There is no need to remain in hiding! God’s deliverance is at hand!

Yet after a chorus of praise is uttered, Zion utters a chorus of doubt: “The LORD has forsaken me. The LORD has forgotten me.” Even in the midst of joy and hope, the feelings of generations of exile rise to the surface and are given voice. God’s people utter their fear that this season had been a season of God’s forsakenness, of God’s abandonment. Can God be trusted? Can God’s words be true? Would God remember us again, after such a long exile?

God addresses these concerns with words of assurance and comfort. God affirms that nothing could make God forget God’s people. Even in exile, God’s people were not forgotten, nor were they abandoned. God was with them still, as God would be with them in their move home. In language as beautiful as the New Testament claim of Romans 8 that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, God tells God’s people that God’s love is as intimate and trustworthy as the love of a nursing mother. Yet God goes even a step further, offering the assurance that even if a parent forgets his or her child; even if a parent’s love becomes unreliable – God’s love is certain. God will never forget God’s own.

And God doesn't. God's faithfulness is a hallmark characteristic of God's love for God's people. Even in the face of tragedy and loss; of fear and doubt – God loves God's people and God's love is unchanging. We know that the story continues. The exiles return home, the captives are freed, and God's initiative of loving faithfulness continues in and throughout the course of human history. God loves: radically, redemptively; offering new and abundant life in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even in the midst of human sin and failing – of wars and genocides, of abuse and oppression – God is love: steadfast, merciful, healing, powerful redemptive love. And God calls us to love.

The poetry of this passage becomes a love letter to us, the truth of God's faithfulness a message that spans all generations. While the specific text of this section of Isaiah is written in the context of the end of the exile of the Israelites, we as God's adopted sons and daughters find assurance in God's promise to never leave nor forsake us. The underlying truths of this passage speak powerfully to us in the context of our day and our time – and our identity as God's people, the Body of Christ. The message that we are remembered by God, inscribed in the palm of God's hand with indelible ink – carved as some translators say – speaks to our identity as God's people and our call to live as such.

We know that, in truth, we too have known exile. We have been estranged from the love of another – through conflict, through death, through incarceration, through circumstances; we have lived as a stranger in a community and found that sometimes we have not been welcomed. We have felt the exile of the isolation of bullying; of judgments against us that have kept us from fellowship or leadership for no reason apart from our race, our gender, or our sexual identity. We have known what it means to be forgotten: when the time has come to be considered for a promotion; when debilitating illness has led to isolation and no visitors have come; when past choices have filled us with shame and we have sent ourselves into exile to spare those we love. Even in these far away places, God has not forgotten us. God remembers us; God comes to us with a promise of salvation; God delivers us into this promised land.

God's power overcomes our isolation; God's love penetrates our estrangement; God's welcome extends mercy our way; and God's remembering of us claims us as God's own.

There is a power to remembering. We know this, as a people. We celebrate the power of remembrance on national holidays celebrating the legacy of those who have paved a better way for us. We celebrate the power of remembrance when we ceremonialize the changing of the guard who stands at the tomb of the unknown soldier. We celebrate the power of remembrance when we memorialize a loved one; when we read the newspaper and pray; when we give thanks for the food we are about to receive and the hands that prepared it; when we write a letter to a young man in college; when we read the stories of our faith, and when we name those who have faced tragedy in the hopes that such tragedy will never happen again.

Just as this is a passage of consolation, it is a passage of call. As God remembers us, we are invited to partner with God in remembering others. We do not know whose name is alongside ours on the palm of God's hand, but we are to look at all we meet, to greet those around us as brothers and sisters united in God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

What's more, we are to remember those we may never meet. We are called to remember children who are trafficked across borders and sold into sexual slavery; we are to remember child soldiers in Northern Africa; we are to remember women who walk miles each day for enough water to nourish their families; we are to remember those buried under rubble of earthquakes in Haiti and New Zealand; we are to remember those washed away in Tsunami waters and those who look to the shores and grieve a loved one lost. We are to remember those who die of HIV/AIDS across the world each day, those who sit inside prison cells and crack houses, those with no money or health care or hope.

And our remembering is the first step toward action. It is the first step toward solidarity. It is the first step in discerning how God is calling us to use the blessings and gifts that we have been given so that we might minister to those in need, those in exile – in our midst and in our world.

God has not forgotten us. In fact, God is with us in Christ, who dwelt among us. And God dwells within each of us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Even when we feel abandoned, isolated, ashamed, abused – God remembers us. And God wears our names, holding us in the palm of God's hand. May we remember those who feel alone in their abandonment, isolation, shame or woundedness, recognizing our brothers and sisters who, like us, have not been forgotten by God. For we all are written on the palm of God's hand. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

[1] Albom, Mitch. *Have a little faith*. (New York: 2009)

[2] Ibid, 206-207.