

Covenant Word

jump to your face and fill you with toasty warm thoughts.” ...Chester loved his Kissing Hand. Now he knew his mother’s love would go with him wherever he went. Even to school.

The day that Chester arrives at school, however, he hesitates before going in. But rather than loosing his confidence, he takes his mother’s hand, stretches out her fingers, and kisses it right in the center of her palm. As Chester scampers into the building, the mother holds her Kissing Hand next to her cheek and is filled with the warmth of the knowledge that Chester loves her too.

Not Forgotten

Isaiah 49:8-16; Psalm 131; Matthew 6:24-34

*A Message by
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Pastor
Sunday
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Lloyd’s sister, Diane Waud, teaches kindergarten at our elementary school. She is the type of teacher that becomes a legend in her own time. Every five year old longs to be in Mrs. Waud’s class, and for many young parents, to be assigned to Mrs. Waud’s class is like receiving a special blessing. One reason these mothers and fathers feel this way is because Diane sits down with the parents before she ever meets the children assigned to her class. At that time, she talks about her memories of bringing her own two children on the first day of school and the emotions that played inside her soul. She was excited about the new things her children

would learn, but admittedly, a little fearful of the new responsibilities and expectations that would be placed on her children. She assures the parents that the children handle this new venture better than they will as parents! She also promises that she will do everything she can not only to make it an easy transition for the children, but for the adults as well.

In that light, Diane shares a story with the anxious parents. It is The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn. In it, a baby raccoon named Chester is fearful of leaving his mother and his home in order to go to school. Repeatedly, he asks his mother, “Please may I stay home with you?” To which his mother always assures him that he will love school.

As a last resort, she tells him a secret. It is a very old secret, she says, that she learned from her mother, who learned it from her mother, who learned it...well, you get the idea. It is the secret of the Kissing Hand. At this point, the mother stretches out Chester’s fingers and kisses the palm of Chester’s hand. She says:

“Whenever you feel lonely and need a little loving from home, just press your hand to your cheek and think, ‘Mommy loves you. Mommy loves you.’ And that very kiss will

Now the New Testament clearly carries the image of a Kissing Hand when Thomas says he will not believe until he can touch the nail imprints left in the hands of Jesus. Jesus, as we have studied just a few weeks ago, does not disappoint, but appears to Thomas and offers him the proof he needs in order to believe. As those who have not seen, yet believe, we often carry this image in our hearts and souls to bring the assurance that there is a heavenly Parent whose love is so great that these scarred hands, whenever we are lonely or ill or in despair, are the very hands that offer us comfort and hope. Just to imagine the offering of these deeply injured hands causes warmth to course through our bodies as we remember, “Our God loves us! Our God loves us!”

The hands of comfort and encouragement are also the image of today’s passage from Isaiah when God tells the children of Israel that their names are graven or tattooed on God’s palms.

The hands of comfort and encouragement are also the image of today’s passage from Isaiah when God tells the children of Israel that their names are

graven or tattooed on God’s palms. It is a reminder that we are with God wherever God happens to be and never far from the thoughts of God.

The gentler side of God is an unusual Old Testament picture. While the New Testament provides images of a loving, forgiving, grace-filled God, it is a bit of a struggle to find, in the Old Testament, a warm, intimate picture of God. Being revengeful and all-powerful, not to mention, almost solely presented as the stern Father who disciplines His children, we are not surprised to find that the children of Israel in today’s text are feeling forgotten and incapable of believing that God would be concerned for them while in exile.

You will remember that before the exile occurred, the prophets of Israel railed against those who so blithely touted the tradition of God’s election of Israel that they totally discounted any possibility that Jerusalem would fall. (Exegesis from Leslie J. Hoppe, “Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A,” The Lectionary Commentary: Old Testament and Acts, Roger E. Van Harn, ed.) They held firm to their belief that God would maintain the Judahite national state and their support of the triple dynasty

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**



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consisting of Israel, David and Jerusalem was unwavering. Such loyalties, however, included only a thin veneer of faith and thus prevented the people from seeing their actual state of rebellion before God. It all sounds strangely familiar in that the social system was unjust and maintained by people of means.

Babylon was used, therefore, as an instrument of divine judgment to dismantle Judah. Jerusalem fell. The Davidic dynasty came to an end. The Temple was destroyed, and its priesthood was scattered. With its people in exile, their infidelity could not be ignored any longer. The judgment was so severe, that the survivors began to believe that God had utterly forsaken them. So in today's text we hear them lament, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." (vs. 14)

We recognize this lamentation immediately, for these exact words have come from our mouths when desperate circumstances descend and we feel forsaken, forgotten and forlorn. Exile comes to us when the chips are down and the stakes are high. Exile is an in-between time when we deny, endure and suffer in order to survive. It is a time to choose between grumbling or growing up. It is when we are in anguish over what to do next... whether to stay or leave, remain or run, fish or cut bait, say yes or no to him or her or the job or the move or the relationship. It is determining whether we will continue on course or turn around, hang in or drop out, invest or play it safe, speak or keep silent. (William Dols, "God's Silent Answer," Just Because it Didn't Happen) When we are in the wilderness of our faith or exiled from community, we think ourselves deserted by God. We forget that our names are inscribed on the palm of God's hands.

Such a faith system, however, presents God as One who is not working as hard as possible to bring about justice, healing and good within us and within our world. It's a theology that seems to purposefully deny that God is all about us, doing everything that God can possibly do to provide us with health, peace, and joy. It ignores the intimate picture presented in today's text of our being so close to God that our names are tattooed on God's hands---always carried by God as a constant reminder of our need and whereabouts. The words that Isaiah brings to the exiled Israelites are a reminder of God's faithfulness to them and of God's presence that is as compassionate as the mother who nurses her child at her breast.

Bill Dols, former Minister of Education at Myer's Park Baptist Church in North Carolina, tells of a time when God's presence nurtured him. In the fall of 1989, his younger brother, Michael, called to tell Bill that he had been diagnosed with AIDS. By Thanksgiving, the doctor approached Bill about the tough decisions that would have to be made regarding his brother's welfare. The questions all dealt with removing life support, the stopping of medications, and finally of discontinuing intravenous nourishment.

Bill describes this experience with the words of exile. He says: *Those are tough questions about somebody you love. They are decisions God alone should be making. Some of you have been there. Others of you someday will be. For most of us, that's prayer time. It is about a lot of distress and agitation. It is about being alone and feeling as if the world is asleep and unconcerned. It is being deeply grieved, even unto death. In the*

end it has very little to do with medical advice or ethics or being rational or "we all know what he would want." It comes down to what you want and what you are able to discern God wants.

If you have been there, like me you probably cannot recall how you got through those hours. What I

do remember is that the answer to all my prayers in those desperate days was pretty much silence. Sheer silence. No envelope with an answer. I believe God was as conflicted, torn, undecided, and ambivalent as I was about what to do next. But in the sheer silence I knew I was not alone. I found myself able to say and do what was needed, to be a grieving brother, and to walk through the darkness to the other side...

To move the exiles through their darkness of discouragement and despair and to the other side of hope, the prophet makes a bold comparison of God as a nursing mother. It is a graphic illustration to encourage the Israelites to believe and acknowledge that God's love for them had not come to an end. Indeed, it could not possibly come to an end, for a nursing mother never ignores the cries of her baby, just as God would never forget God's children in exile. (Hoppe)

In John Steinbeck's classic novel, The Grapes of Wrath, we are introduced to the Joad family who was in a desperate plight. This family's story is one of thousands of Americans during the dust bowl crisis that took place in the mid-west. With all their belongings packed onto their truck, they struggle to stay together as a family and to find work. Crisis upon crisis occurs until we find them in a boxcar camp with the hopeful prospects of picking cotton. They are up before dawn in order to get in the worker's line early enough to be assured some work. They receive 90 cents for their collective labor and return to their boxcar in such a heavy downpour that Steinbeck describes it as an afternoon "silver with rain."

As the rain continues, the waters around the camp begin to rise. Having picked cotton, the Joad's daughter, Rose of Sharon goes into early labor. Through the night, as the men labor to build a wall to divert the waters from their camp, Rose of Sharon labors to give birth. As the wall collapses and the waters rise above their trucks and into the box cars where they are living, Rose of Sharon delivers a stillborn baby. The unnamed child is placed in an apple box and set free into the current of the water.

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When the entire camp floods, the family flees and, at last, finds refuge in an old barn. As they settle Rose of Sharon in the hay, they realize that they are not alone. A boy comes from a corner of the barn and offers a dirty comforter for Rose of Sharon to use. He tells Ma Joad that his father is sick and hungry. No, not

just hungry, he is starving to death. For six days, the father has had nothing to eat. He always passed his food on to his son saying that he wasn't hungry or that he had just eaten. The boy confesses that he had stolen some bread the night before, but his father could not keep it down. He begs for soup or milk in order that his father might live.

As Ma Joad considers their situation, she looks at Pa and Uncle John who were standing by helplessly and gazing at the sick man.

She looks at Rose of Sharon huddled in the comforter.

When Ma's eyes pass back to Rose of Sharon, they make eye contact. The two women look deeply into one another. The girl's breath came short and gasping.

"Yes," she said.

Ma smiled. "I knowed you would. I knowed," she said.

Ma then got everyone out into the tool shed, leaving Rose of Sharon and the starving man. For a minute Rose of Sharon sat still in the whispering barn. Then she hoisted her tired body up and drew the comforter about her. She moved slowly to the corner and stood looking down at the wasted face, and into the wide, frightened eyes. Then slowly she lay down beside him. He shook his head slowly from side to side. Rose of Sharon loosened one side of the blanket and bared her breast. "You got to," she said. Then she squirmed closer and pulled his head close.

It is into our most desperate moments that this God of love comes to offer us sustenance and presence. Just as the Israelites were not forgotten in their Exile, neither are we forgotten in our challenges and plights and wanderings. God's comfort is offered until our souls are composed and we rest like a satisfied baby against its mother. (Psalm 131)

I have told you before about when my parents made a trip to South America. There were only three Jackson children at that time and they were pawned off to Aunts and Uncles. My sister, Betty Lou, was sent to Mobile. Mary Helen and Jim were put on the train to go to Americus, Georgia. My brother was only a preschooler, and so he watched, wide eyed, as our mother got them settled on the train. There were lunches with a few special treats packed neatly into a shoe box. There was a book or two, and then, to his delight there were new crayons and a coloring book. These were treasures for this little boy who grew up to make his living in commercial art. As our mother began to take her leave, Jim reached up and took her face into both of his hands. Looking her straight in the eye, he pled, "Don't forget where am I!"

This God who loves us...this God who carries the marks on his hands that speak of our need and our desire to be delivered from exile, wilderness, and destitution...this God who has nursed us at Her breast to sustain our lives...this God will not forget "where am I."

Oh Lord, Our God,

With gratitude, we acknowledge your loving presence with us in the good and the bad; the quiet, still moments as well as the

rushed and hectic ones; the times of intimate closeness and the times when we feel far, far away, exiled and forgotten.

Continue to nurture and sustain us...humble us with childlike seeking until we are composed, satisfied and resting peacefully in your arms, assured by your comfort.

We ask all these things in the name of the One whose hands bear the marks of our redemption,
Amen.

This God who loves us...this God who carries the marks on his hands that speak of our need and our desire to be delivered from exile, wilderness, and destitution...this God who has nursed us at Her breast to sustain our lives...this God will not forget "where am I."

Perhaps there needs to be an acknowledgement in your life of this God who loves and cares for you in your personal exile. We welcome and

encourage such decisions of faith. Should you desire to make a public decision, I will be here at the front to greet you as we stand and sing, hymn #180, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul."