

The Palm of Gods's Hand

Isaiah 49:13-16

May 29, 2016 - Memorial Day Weekend

How beautiful, that scripture that Carole just read to you:

I will not forget you, says God.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Turning this passage over and over in my mind these past few days, my thoughts kept taking me to, of all things, our Christmas pageant. On this hot and sunny Memorial Day weekend, it may seem pretty incongruous to be thinking about what happens up here on a chilly December morning, but I couldn't help myself, and you'll understand why in a moment.

If you've been to our Pageant, you know how much fun we have.

There's dozens of kids up here dressed as angels and shepherds and sheep and cows.

And our deal is that ANY of our older kids who wants a speaking part gets one.

This past year, I think we had 37 speaking parts, including a dozen wise men.

Scripture very conveniently does not *specify* the number of wise men, for which Marcia and I, as pageant directors, are immensely grateful.

In addition to being pretty chill about who gets speaking parts,

we're also pretty chill about rehearsals:

we have **one**. One rehearsal.

As a consequence, it *is* true that many of our actors don't exactly have their lines nailed down before we perform.

Which is why, during the pageant, I am right down here on the floor crawling around with a copy of the script in my hand,

whispering lines to any child who gets that sudden stricken look on their face.

"I'm sorry, there's no room in this inn!"

"Glory to God in the Highest!"

Over the years, there *have* been some kids with amazing memory, who manage to get those lines stuck in their heads right away.

And over the years, there have been quite a number of kids who have been very creative about how to not forget their lines.

We had a wise man who had written his lines inside the box of myrrh that he was careful to carry the whole time.

We had a Mary who tucked her lines into the hay in the manger.

And -- and this is why all this came to mind --

and then there was the wonderfully dramatic Angel Gabriel.

Every time she spoke, she made these beautiful gestures to her audience, with such elegance, such theatrical flare.

After the pageant, she came and found me, with a twinkle in her eye and a big grin.

Hey Alida, she said, check this out.

And yes, there it was --

every line she needed written on the palms of her hand.

That's why I never forgot, she said, with a giggle, it was all written right here.

She was good – I never spotted it.

I have wondered how long it took to wash all that Sharpie pen off...

So, sitting at my desk these past couple days, mulling over our passage from Isaiah,

you can see why it's been impossible *not* to think of our Angel Gabriel, who forgot nothing because it was written on the palms of her hands.

Here's that scripture passage again:

I will never forget you, says the God of Isaiah,

I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Only, of course, the analogy doesn't hold for long.
 Ink washes off, eventually;
 Angel Gabriel's lines vanished under the scrub brush, eventually.

The power of Isaiah's verse is in its permanence.
 The word there, inscribed,
 inscribed on God's palms,
 is the same Hebrew word that was used
 whenever they were speaking about what was engraved on a stone,
 chiseled into buildings,
 marked into tablets to last forever.
 So we, we are inscribed into God's hands forever,
 our very selves, before God's eyes forever.
 We are forgotten -- never
 Remembered ... always.

These words Carole read to you were written over 2600 years ago.
 They were spoken during a hard, hard time,
 they were spoken to a people who wondered if they had been forgotten,
 wondered if God did remember them.
 The people of Israel had lost their land,
 they'd been taken away into captivity in Babylon,
 where they were held as slaves for 70 years.
 Three generations living and dying in a land far from home.
 And to them Isaiah spoke,
 he shared these words of promise from the God of hope,
 these words of compassion from a tender God.
 He wrote:
*Zion says, 'The Lord has forsaken me,
 my Lord has forgotten me.'*
*Oh, but can a woman forget her nursing-child,
 or show no compassion for the child of her womb?
 Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

The God who loves you as tenderly as a mother loves her child,
said Isaiah, would this God ever forget you? No.

You are held and cherished like a child by their parent,
you are loved.

And you are always, *always* remembered.

Each one of you, by name, each child of God.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

Fifteen, almost 16 years ago now,

we welcomed a woman here at the church to speak to us about her life.

She was a missionary -- she still is one, we still hear from her regularly.

From Malaysia, she was born to a Chinese man who'd been sold by his parents
when he was ten, because there were too many mouths to feed --

and a Malaysian woman whose mother had in desperation sold her, too.

Choon herself was an unwanted child:

a daughter, not a son,

born on a day the priests said was inauspicious,

in the year of the Tiger, a bad omen three times over.

Only her mother's pleading had kept her father from giving her away.

Raised as though she had no worth, as if humanity wanted to forget her,

when she was a teenager Choon heard the story of a God who loved her.

A God in whose palms she was inscribed.

For the first time, she understood what she was worth: everything.

For the first time, she felt treasured, known, remembered.

And she knew that her life's work would be to make sure others knew that, too.

Her work took her to Afghanistan at the height of the Taliban,

where, in dark corners of homes,

secretly she taught women to read and to write and to know that they were

loved, that they had worth.

And when she was visiting with us, here, Greenfield Hill,
she told us a story I've never forgotten.

"Whenever I am asked if it was worth it," she said,
"the cold of Afghanistan, the terror under which we lived,
I tell them about Miriam.

Miriam could not read, could not even write her own name,
and did not know that she was precious in God's sight.

And one day, finally, she was able to spell out her own name;
with a stick on the dirt floor she scratched it out, letter by letter.

And the next day when I came to her,
she said, "Choon, I prayed last night. I prayed to your Jesus.
And I saw him holding out his hands to me.

I saw his hands held out to me.

And I saw that written in the palm of his hand was my name.

My own name.

I could read my name written on his hand."

She knew, then, Miriam knew,
that she had worth,
that she was treasured,
that she was known by God, remembered by God.
And no one could ever again take that from her.
She was inscribed on the palm of God's hand.

This weekend, we are called to remember
those whom God has never forgotten.

We are called to remember each child of God sent off to war,
sent off to serve in the midst of chaos and hurt,
sent off to do what duty asked of them, in the midst of a broken world.
Each child of God who did not return from war and hurt,
who gave up their life in the hope of bringing peace to this broken world.

We are called to remember even when others forget;

we are called to remember those whom God has never forgotten. They, each one of them, was inscribed in the palm of God's hands, they, each one of them, must be written in our hearts.

Yesterday I learned the story of one of those fallen soldiers, a boy from Wilton named Nick Madaras. Nick grew up with one great love: soccer. Out on the field whenever he could be, on the team at Wilton High School, his coach said, he'd never seen such dedication and love for the game. When he wasn't playing, he was coaching: he was a beloved youth soccer coach. The kids adored him -- he made it fun, he made them laugh.

After he graduated from Wilton high school, without telling a soul, Nick Madaras went and enlisted because it seemed like the right thing to do. He was sent to Iraq in 2006. In the midst of hurt and chaos, in the midst of a broken world, he found one thing that was sheer joy: he found kids playing soccer, with whatever they could find -- tin cans, plastic bags filled with junk, anything.

When he came home on a two-week leave in August of 2006, all he could talk about to his parents was those kids. He had hundreds of pictures on his laptop to show us, said his mom, all the kids he'd met, all the pictures of him playing with them. And what he *really* wanted was for them to be able to really play a good game of soccer. So he asked his dad to please, after he got back to Iraq, please send him soccer balls.

But a month later, on September 3, 2006, Nick Madaras, who was then 19, was killed by a roadside bomb while out on patrol. Child of God, boy from Connecticut, soccer coach, son and brother.

And what happened next was this.

A Wilton man, a veteran himself of the Korean War, who had never met Nick, heard about the soccer balls Nick had wanted to have sent.

And so outside the American Legion hall, he put up a sign, and a place to collect soccer balls, and asked people to give.

They came in by the hundreds.

And on each ball that was sent to the troops in Iraq to give to the kids, was written Nick's name.

PFC Nicholas Madaras, inscribed on each ball.

Ten years later, through the organization called Kick for Nick, more than 45,000 soccer balls have now been sent around the world, to Iraq and Afghanistan and beyond.

Soldiers in the Philippines have requested them, in Tanzania, in Djibouti, requested them to give to the kids they meet.

45,000 soccer balls given to kids who receive them with laughter, kids who rejoice in being remembered.

And on each one of them is written Nick's name.

His mother said this:

"I've had the good fortune to be there, to put a soccer ball into a child's hands and to see the transformation.

In the school we built in India, in Rajasthan, we distributed the balls and the kids started playing right away.

I watched them, and I knew:

that was Nick, transferred into these children.

That was just what he had wanted to see."

Nick Madaras's name, written 45,000 times,
on soccer balls played on fields around the world
by children who are now remembered
just as Nick is remembered, today and every day.
His name, written on every one of those fields:
a name which first was written on the palm of God's hand.

We too are known and remembered.

Each one of us.

Each of us, inscribed on God's palm,
carried in God's heart.

Every one passes through times when we feel a little lost: we are not.

Times when we feel overlooked: we are not.

I will not forget you, says the God of Isaiah, the God of Nick Madaras and every
fallen soldier,

the God of children at play in Rajasthan and Afghanistan and Iraq.

I will not forget you.

See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.

May those who are inscribed on the palms of God's hands

be written always in our hearts;

may we remember that every child of humanity

is a child of God;

and may we remember that we, too,

are remembered --

we are carried, we are cherished,

we are in the hands of God.

Amen.