

HANDS

Isaiah 49:8-16a



Hands are very tender images. Our hands represent who we are, our will and our actions. One of my favorite photographs of my father shows his large elderly hand holding the tiny hand of a child. The nursing home where my father finished out his days and the day care for the children of employees did many things together, which was how the picture of my father's hand was taken.

One of the most famous paintings of all time portrays two hands upheld in prayer. Albrecht Durer and his brother Albert, 2 of 18 children of a struggling goldsmith in a tiny 15th century village near Nuremberg, Germany, dreamed of becoming artists. But there was no way their father could afford to send either of them to the academy in Nuremberg. The two brothers agreed on a plan. One would support the other by working in the mines while the other entered the academy. After graduating the brother who attended would either support the other to attend the academy through his art or work in the mines himself. They decided who would get to go to the academy first by a coin toss. Albrecht Durer won the toss and entered the academy while his brother entered the dangerous mines for 4 years to support him. Albrecht's work at the academy was almost an immediate sensation. His etchings, his woodcuts, and his oils were far better than those of most of his professors, and by the time he graduated, he was beginning to earn considerable fees for his commissioned works. After 4 years the Durer family held a festive gathering to celebrate Albrecht's accomplishments. At the gathering Albrecht proposed a toast to his brother who helped him through and promised that it was now his turn to reciprocate. The younger Albert demurred, "No, brother. I cannot go to Nuremberg. It is too late for me. Look what four years in the mines have done to my hands! The bones in every finger have been smashed at least once, and lately I have been suffering from arthritis so badly in my right hand that I cannot even hold a glass to return your toast, much less make delicate lines on parchment or canvas with a pen or a brush. No, brother ... for me it is too late." Albrecht's drawing of his brothers gnarled hands upheld in prayer. And those simple hands have become one of the most famous images of all time. Hands are poignant images.

<http://www.moytura.com/reflections/prayinghands.htm>

And so the image that the prophet Isaiah shares with us today of God who can no more forget God's people than a woman could forget her nursing child. "*Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.*" The word translated as *inscribed* actually means etched into or engraved. And so you and

I and all of God's people are *engraved* on the palms of God's hands. Our God will not forget us.

Of course God doesn't have hands. God is Spirit. God doesn't have a face or an arm or a beard. God isn't *male*, isn't literally a *Father*. Michelangelo's famous Sistine Chapel ceiling image of God with flowing white hair and beard touching his new creation Adam with his finger and giving him life is no more than a metaphor. In fact the Bible forbids picturing God in the 2nd Commandment: "*Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth; thou shalt not bow down to them, nor worship them.*" In Eastern Orthodox iconography God the Father is never to be pictured, for God is ultimately a mystery that is beyond all human conception. At best our imagery and pictures for God are metaphors to help us understand what God is like. Speaking of God's hand is an anthropomorphism. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* defines anthropomorphism as:

The attribution to God of human characteristics. This tendency arises out of the conditions of human knowledge which originates in sense-perception. In its crudest forms it is most prominent in primitive and polytheistic religions. Scripture... uses anthropomorphic language, which is in most cases clearly metaphorical. In Christian philosophy... seemingly anthropomorphic conceptions such as personality, will, etc are predicated of God, though in a way different from that in which they are used of creatures. Without the use of these or similar modes of expression any developed exposition of the nature and attributes of God would be impossible.

And so through the image of *hands* we try and say something about God. In Genesis God is pictured as molding clay with *his* hands as a sculptor and then literally breathing life into his new creation Adam. The Bible frequently speaks of God's *hand* as being victorious in battle, gracious to God's people, as bringing about God's will. In the N.T. Jesus is said after his resurrection and ascension to be *seated at the right hand of God*.

Beyond hand imagery God is variously pictured as a warrior, a potter, a husband, a wife, a mother, a father, a gardener and a king. We hear of God's hand, God's thigh, God's foot, God's arm, God's face and even God's backside (which is revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai). God *speaks* a human Word. God's *breath* is his Spirit. God is a *person* to whom the Bible attributes all sorts of human characteristics: anger, joy, happiness, wrath, loving kindness and even jealousy.

Our images and metaphors are at best symbols to help us understand the mystery that we call God. And yet our God, whom our human minds can only comprehend through such anthropomorphic symbols, does us one better. God becomes human. God takes on human flesh. God is born among us from an impregnated human egg growing in Mary's womb. God is born as a human child. God becomes *incarnate* "*enfleshed*" in Jesus of Nazareth. Through becoming someone who is both at the same time fully human and

fully divine and yet one undivided person, God could show us what he is like. Through Jesus God could show us what he is up to.

And what God is up to looks very much like the description of what God is up to spoken to us by the prophet Isaiah over 400 years before Jesus' birth.

- God promised through Isaiah to make his people a covenant to the nations – a light if you will representing God's holiness, God's presence and God's love for all the world.
- God spoke tenderly to those who were oppressed, exiled, imprisoned, in darkness. God promised to set them free, to make *a way* for them to a new and promised home.
- God himself promised to be with them and guide them.
- God promised *the way* to be joyful. The mountains and deserts that had been overwhelming obstacles would become a choir proclaiming God's comfort and compassion for his people.
- In the midst of this song Zion sings a counter refrain that the Lord has forsaken her, that God has forgotten and neglected his holy city. And it is in response to this accusation that God proclaims that he has not forgotten. In fact Zion and Zion's children are etched on the palms of God's hands.

And it is on the cross, where nails are driven into those loving hands of God incarnate, that God has most fully and completely claimed us each as his own.

In Jesus I believe that ancient prophecy of Isaiah to people who felt trapped, exiled, lost, hopeless, despairing, broken, and forsaken is spoken no less to you and me and all who still feel that way today. *Come out* of your prisons. *Show yourselves* willing to step out on God's new way. **Trust** in God's promise. **Take the risk** of walking in the way that leads towards God's Kingdom. Let God's love comfort you. Let his life of love and service guide you. **Rejoice** in God's compassion for you and for the whole world. **Believe**, even when you feel most forsaken, that you are loved, that you are inscribed in palms of those wounded hands. **Amen.**