

“Mother’s Love”

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 49:13-18

**First Presbyterian Church
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In the manner of Dr. Stancil, I’m going to open our sermon time today with a little story, this one from the Bible, sort of. More like inspired by the Bible.

On the first day, God created the dog and said, “Sit all day by the door of your house and bark at anyone who comes in or walks past. For this, I will give you a life span of 20 years.” The dog said, “That’s a long time to be barking. How about only 10 years and I’ll give you back the other 10?” So God agreed.

On the second day, God created the monkey and said: “Entertain people, do tricks, and make them laugh. For this, I’ll give you a 20-year life span.” The monkey said, “Monkey tricks for 20 years? That’s a pretty long time to perform. How about I give you back 10 like the dog did?” And God agreed.

On the third day, God created the cow and said, “You must go into the field with the farmer all day long and suffer under the sun, have calves and give milk to support the farmer’s family. For this, I will give you a life span of 60 years.” The cow said, “That’s kind of a tough life you want me to live for 60 years. How about 20 and I’ll give back the other 40?” And God agreed again.

On the fourth and fifth day, God was busy creating other things, but on the sixth day, God created man and woman and said, “Eat, sleep, play, marry and enjoy your life. For this, I’ll give you 20 years.” But the man and the woman said: “Only 20 years? Could you possibly give us our 20, the 40 the cow gave back, the 10 the monkey gave back, and the 10 the dog gave back – that makes 80, okay?” “Okay,” God said. “As long as you’re sure.” So that is why for our first 20 years we eat, sleep, play and enjoy ourselves. For the next 40 years we slave in the sun to support our family. For the next 10 years we do monkey tricks to entertain the grandchildren, nieces and nephews. And for the last 10 years we sit on the front porch and bark at everybody.

That, my friends, is the life God gave us. Not really. God gave us eternal life in paradise – in the Garden of Eden – and we gave it back. We decided we could call the shots better than God – take whatever we want when we want it – and that’s why we have the life we have, constantly struggling to discern and do the right thing.

In our Old Testament lesson today, the Prophet Isaiah is trying to guide the Israelites in their relationship with God, so that they discern and do the right thing. The Israelites had been liberated from slavery in Egypt, survived their wilderness journey and entered the Promised Land. And now they've been taken captive by foreign nations and scattered throughout the surrounding kingdoms, because they were not doing the right thing in the eyes of God.

In Isaiah, the Israelites are personified and referred to as Zion, as if they are a single person. Isaiah tells us that Zion (Israel) cries out, saying, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me." But Isaiah sees things differently. Isaiah knows the Lord is faithful and can be counted on to always love and care for his people Israel -care for us- even when we have gone astray, even if we begin to doubt the Lord is with us.

I mean, really, how can a loving and caring God allow his people to suffer? Anyone might doubt God's faithfulness. And yet, suffering is a part of life, sadly. It's not how God wants things to be, but it is a consequence of our choices, as a people and as individuals. And through the Spirit of the Lord, God works to bring us through- and shield us from suffering.

The Spirit of the Lord – when it comes to us through the love and care of another – can and does shield us from that which would cause us to suffer. And there is not a more faithful and stronger Spirit of care and concern than that embodied by a loving mother. When Israel cries out that God has forsaken them, Isaiah replies on behalf of God, saying, "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."

God is as faithful as the most loving and caring mother, and even more so! We know that even the most loving and caring mother can struggle to be the best mom she can be, but not God. It is in God's DNA to love and care for us. It's who God is – God is love. And there's no greater love on earth than motherly love. Isaiah makes three promises on behalf of God when it comes to God's love and care for us. First, says God, "I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands."

Remember when you were in school and you would write something on your hand? And, oh boy, if that something was the name of a classmate, well that really meant something, right? God has your name written on the palm of his hand. He has claimed us as his own, and nothing will ever change that.

The second promise God declares is that he's always got our back. "Your walls are continually before me," says God, speaking of the fortress walls designed to protect the Israelites.

What this means for us is that all those things we do to keep ourselves and our loved ones safe – God is already out ahead of us making sure they are and will be in place, according to God’s will.

Now, this is not to say that what we do to ensure health and safety will always work. We know all too well that there are cracks in our fortress walls. But God sees past our momentary failures to his sure and certain protection, protection that conquers even death itself.

God promises us life eternal and a peace beyond worldly comprehension and understanding. It’s kind of like a mom promising her child a future of health and happiness beyond what can be known and seen at the time. And with God, through Christ, that future is assured.

In the time of Isaiah, the Temple was the most protected place imaginable. And even though it had been destroyed by a foreign king when Isaiah was written, God declares that his people have not been abandoned and that they remain safe in his protection, even if their visible sign of protection – their fortress walls – no longer stand.

And so it is with us. There may be cracks and holes in the walls that protect us – those governmental, healthcare, educational, vocational and even religious systems we rely on – but God’s faithful are indeed surrounded by a sure and sturdy divine and spiritual wall of protection. And that protection can never be breached or destroyed.

The third promise declared by God is, “Your builders outdo your destroyers, and those who laid you waste go away from you.” Interestingly, the Hebrew word for “builders” is one letter off from the word for children. Children are the future builders of society. This brings us back to the family theme of parents and children.

While the Israelites were scattered throughout foreign lands, they continued to be fruitful and multiply, to have children born into the faith. Likewise, for us, we are scattered throughout the area surrounding our church, and yet, we have not stopped being the church, we must not stop being the church. We must always and everywhere be helping the church to be fruitful and multiply, even in our time of exile from the church building.

But how? Well, there are people who could be gathering with us here on Zoom, with a little guidance and encouragement. So I encourage you to reach out to them, this week. Let them know they are missed, and ask if there is anything more the church could be doing – anything you could do – to help them feel and be more connected. Just that simple gesture can make all the difference in the world.

Reaching out to folks now will also make all the difference in how robustly and fully we emerge from our time of exile, when it's safe to gather for in-person worship, Sunday school, fellowship time and the like.

Just like the Israelites had to keep the faith and hang together even in their physical separation, we must continue to call one another back that which gave birth to their faith, back to the church, whether that's through Zoom, phone calls, cards and notes, and certainly when the time comes for us to gather again in our sacred and beloved church building.

God has claimed us as his beloved children – writing our name upon his hand. God protects us within a fortress of faith that can never be breached or destroyed. And God gathers us as a family of faith, and calls upon us to build up the church – to reach out to others – in the Spirit of Christ and to the glory of God. Amen.

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**