

8 Epiphany – Year A –March 2, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 49:8-16a; Psalm 131; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5; Matthew 6:24-34
Susan E. Wilmot

One of the most beautiful and encouraging lines in Scripture is found in our reading from the prophet Isaiah tonight. It is the word of God, “See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands.” This inscription is not just some kind of hastily scribbled inky message, easily washed off or erased. The meaning of the Hebrew word is to cut into, or engrave. It is a permanent inscription, deep and personal, physical and fleshy. It means that the Lord our God always keeps us in His hands, and knows us all by name. There’s even more. The Hebrew word for palm can also refer to the sole of the foot. If we go back to the beginning of this reading, there are allusions to the words Jesus uses in the Gospel of Luke to define His mission in this world, for example as the one who sets the prisoners free. In fact, the whole passage embraces the mission of God’s suffering servant, whom Christians know to be Jesus Christ. It is full of God’s grace and tender compassion to His people from every corner of the world. As I reflected on this passage and its references to our Lord Jesus, the language used brought to mind Jesus’ crucifixion. There are allusions to Jesus’ own cry from the cross; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Psalm 22:1). But most of all, in the indelible inscription made in His hands and feet by the nails on the cross, He gives life to the world, and reconciles all to God. Even as Isaiah’s prophetic words describe God in human terms, we know that God has lived amongst us as the Word made flesh in Jesus, our Lord.

In Isaiah’s day, the people of Zion are about to return from exile, frightened and defeated, lacking hope and vision. Even as the passage suggests, they feel forsaken by God. This reading is one of hope and encouragement. God assures us that He never abandons us, and that He means for His children to be a covenant to the nations. By way of illustration, God uses one of the most intimate bonds in human life, a mother and her nursing child. It is clear that even that relationship can be a forgetful one. We are indeed fallible human beings, but God loves and cares for us so deeply that He will never forget or forsake us.

The images of all creation bowing to God’s will also suggest a new Exodus to freedom from exile and oppression. The words to the prisoners are “Come out”, and to those in darkness, “Show yourselves.” Jesus, the Light of the world, also promises to free those in prisons, and to bring all those who believe in Him from darkness into the light of God. Behind each of these promises is God’s way of being in the world, and details of how God turns the ways of the world upside down. To offer a promise of release to prisoners is scandalous. It tells us that Jesus’ way overthrows worldly judgments, and subverts the authorities. To invite us to come out from darkness to live in the light of God means to expose all things that go against God’s Truth. As the Gospels proclaim, Jesus’ way was a major source of conflict and contention in His life, ultimately leading to His unjust arrest and crucifixion. All along the journey to freedom, God promises to provide food and water, shelter and direction, as well as God’s unfailing comfort and compassion for His people. Jesus lived this promise. He healed the sick and offered steadfast love to all. He offered life and light, constantly revealing God’s Truth, and always refusing to compromise His integrity along the way. And through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God flings wide the doors of salvation for all who believe in Him. God is with us even to the end of the ages.

God is still answering our prayers and doing mighty acts on behalf of His children. Have we noticed God at work in our lives this year, this month, this week, or this day? This is the crux of

this week's lesson. Many of us are still prisoners of our own device (as *The Eagles* song goes) in one way or another, fearful of moving forward in our faith journeys or anxious about what the future holds. Many of us are still moving in and out between the Light and the shadows for the same reasons. And many of us still struggle to recognize God at work in our lives, and the lives of others every single day. When life gets overwhelming, we too may even think that God has forsaken us. Yet we are inscribed on the palms of God's hands, and the soles of His feet. Jesus' sacrifice has freed us from sin and death. So, how do we live with that knowledge and blessing constantly in view, giving thanks to God in all things, and at all times?

Some of you may have met our friend, Claire, when she visited with us briefly last year. If you didn't meet her, I don't know how else to describe her, except to say that she is brimming over with God. Almost every sentence she utters includes the words, "Praise God!" She is quite unashamed to share her faith, and her love of God in Christ Jesus, with absolutely everyone she meets. The latter gift of evangelism fits her like a second skin and is just as natural to her as well. Let's be sure we understand God's mission for all followers of Jesus clearly. We are all called to share our faith in word and deed, but some of us have been especially gifted as evangelists. However, what really makes Claire so special is how she lives her freedom in Christ every day and how she walks in His Light. Her whole life is grounded in constant prayer and discernment. There is no separation for her between daily life and worshipping God. In the integrity of her faith and trust in the Lord, it is all one. She talks with God as to her best friend. She listens and watches for direct and indirect messages and signs from God through her prayers, through worship in her community of faith, through Bible study, and through her interaction with others. In the freedom of Christ, Claire is one of the most fully alive people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. She has learned how to put her worries and anxiety into God's hands, and truly 'to let go and let God'. She shines.

God knows that Claire is a very special person. God knows that we are all special to Him. We each have our own Spiritual gifts from God, which transform us, and those around us, as we exercise them in God's service. It is less important *how* we pray, worship, and study Scripture, than the fact that we do each of these in a way that honors God and shows our love of Jesus. Prayer keeps us focused on God in Christ. Worshipping the Lord in community equips us for service in the world, and helps us to put our faith into action. Studying God's Word helps us to discern God's will for our own lives and for the life of this community of faith. Although we are each ingrained in God's hands, He is still the potter and we are still the clay. As we learn to surrender each part of our lives to God, we are freed from our prisons, drenched in God's light and truth, and constantly transformed.

This week, we're all invited to look for the fingerprints and handprints of God all over our lives, everywhere around us, and in everyone we know. Let's strive to express our gratitude to God for our freedom in Christ, to worship God in the fullness of His light and abundant love, and to share the Good News of Jesus Christ joyfully!

Amen.