

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Isaiah 49:8-16a

SERMON TITLE: Written on God's Hands

Our scripture lesson this morning is from Isaiah 49:8-16a. This morning's text follows the second of four servant songs found in Isaiah. In fact, the passage begins with God speaking to the servant while God's people are in exile, scattered throughout Babylonia and other foreign lands. The land of promise lies desolate. God's people are prisoners bound in the darkness. But the prophet speaks of deliverance--a new exodus—and of God's unfailing compassion and unwillingness to forget. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE LESSON.**

The picture you see on the screens is of the American military cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer in the Normandy region of France. The cemetery is located on a bluff overlooking Omaha Beach—the site of the greatest loss of life during the Allied invasion of France during World War II on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

The cemetery encompasses 175 acres. The grounds contain a semicircular garden adjacent to a memorial colonnade. On the garden walls are inscribed the names of 1, 557 dead Americans whose remains have not been located or identified.

But that's not all. Covering most of the grounds are 9,386 white marble grave markers arranged in neat, symmetrical rows. Most are in the shape of a Latin cross. Others are in the shape of the star of David. Inscribed on each marker is name of a dead American soldier. The individual cross you see on the screen bears the inscription: Meran A. Barsam, Jr., 2nd Lt., 360 Bomb Sq, 303 Bomb Gp (H), California, August 27, 1943.

Soldiers don't want to be forgotten in death, especially by the ones they died to defend. That's why names are inscribed in stone in America's military cemeteries—and that's why we observe Memorial Day each year.

But soldiers aren't the only ones who want to be remembered, are they? None of us want to be forgotten in death so every cemetery, military or otherwise, contains names inscribed in stone.

And none of us want to be forgotten in life. One of the reasons Alzheimer's is such a tragic disease is that it robs us of memory to the point where even loved ones are forgotten. And none of us want to be forgotten. We want to be remembered in death and in life.

And especially, those of us who profess our faith in God want to be remembered by the One who made us—for if God were to forget us, what would we do? How could we live cut-off from our Creator and from the very source of love itself? Life—if we could call it that—would be little more than a desolate wilderness with no relief from the scorching wind, the blazing sun, and an unending hunger and thirst.

And yet, in exile, God's people did feel forgotten. God's people had been defeated, imprisoned and scattered to the four winds. The Promised Land lay desolate. God's people suffered in exile—and these circumstances were attributed to God's forgetfulness.

But now, the prophet proclaims, God declares a time of favor—a day of salvation. God says to the servant, *I have kept you and given you as a covenant, to establish the land, to apportion the desolate heritages.* It's time for the captives to *Come out* from their prison cells and return home. God promises them sustenance and protection for the journey. God will lower the mountains and raise the valleys to make a path for the people as they return from the far places of exile. The heavens and the earth rejoice; the mountains sing; for this compassionate God is acting to comfort a suffering people. It is a new Exodus from bondage to freedom, from exile to home, from death to life.

Even still, the promise seems too good to be true. *But Zion said, “The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.”* Then God replies: *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.*

So Zion was remembered and the promise kept. And Jesus was remembered—the one who said from cross, *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*—was remembered and on the third day he was raised from the dead. Even a thief crucified with Jesus was remembered. The thief said from the cross: *Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.* Jesus replied: *Today you will be with me in paradise.*

My brothers and sister, all of us want to be remembered in life and in death. So could it be that when our lives turn desolate and oppressive as if we too are forgotten in exile—the way home begins with a renewed hope that God does indeed remember us—that our names are inscribed on the palms of God’s hands?

Roberta Langella once felt forgotten by God. She had been raised in the church, but after her parents divorced, her life went into a tailspin. She started drinking and taking drugs. She dropped out of school and began living on the streets. She went from one abusive relationship after another. She frequented so-called “shooting galleries” where she would share needles with others getting high on drugs. As a result, she became HIV-positive. Life, for her, was desolation—and she felt forgotten by God.

But then, something happened to change her life. She says: *I finally hit bottom, at the end of a five- or six- day crack binge. It was a Tuesday night when I ran out of money. For some reason I drove to the church...That night I found myself at the altar shedding tears I couldn’t stop. “Oh, God, I need you in my life. Help me, please!”*

The people of that church embraced her and included her. They made a place for her in the church choir—and slowly but surely, Roberta Langella discovered that she had not been forgotten by God. Indeed, her name was inscribed on the palms of God’s hands. She now heads up a ministry called “New Beginnings,” a weekly outreach to drug abusers and the homeless. (Cymbala, Jim. *Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, pp. 40-46.)

All of us want to be remembered in death and in life. We have our names inscribed on grave markers so that we won’t be forgotten. And we especially don’t want to be forgotten by God—and according to the prophet, we are not: *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.*