

The First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina
Roland P. Perdue, 111, Interim Pastor
Sundays, February 26, 2012
The First Sunday in Lent

MOMMA'S GOT A NEW TATTOO

Isaiah 49:1, 13-18

Cody missed his father. So did his brother, sister and mother. They all missed him. He left one day, walked out and off. But Cory's missing seemed more profound than that of his mother and siblings. What he could not articulate when conscious invaded his sleep and seeped into his dreams; his anxious, sad dreams.

In his dreams he was never his present adult self. He had become small, a toddler again, as he rushed around the house on tiny, fat legs, feverishly showing off.

“See this? And this? See me somersault? See me pull my wagon?” His smallness colored every act . . . He thought of how it would be if his father returned (home) some time in the future when Cody was a man. “Look at what I’ve accomplished,” Cody would tell him. “Notice where I’ve got to, how far I’ve come without you.”

“Was it something I said? Was it sometime I did? Was it something I didn’t do, that made you go away?”

- Anne Tyler, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*

Cody and his family are characters in Anne Tyler’s *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. That is not all they are, of course, for they are stand-ins for many of us.

Absence Dominates

Cody’s waking and dreaming are dominated by his father absence. Cody’s experience of his father is an experience of his father not being there.

Children often blame themselves for their parents’ difficulties; they become the “designated victims.” And thus Cody asks, “Was it something I said, did, didn’t do, that made you go away?” It will probably take a long time for him to realize that the only answer is NO! It is not his fault. And he may never realize that in any authentic way.

However, the people to whom the ancient Isaian prophet spoke had no doubt what has caused their experience of God to be that of absence, abandonment, forsakenness. “Was it something I said? Was it something I did? Was it something I didn’t do, that made you go away?” Yes! Yes! The answer is yes!

They had been warned repeatedly what would happen if Zion trusted in political and military allegiances with Assyria or Egypt rather than rely upon trust and fidelity to Yahweh God. Finally the Persian Empire invaded Jerusalem and her citizens were marched off in captivity. Devastation, famine, distress and death were left behind as once again God's people were slaves; this time in Babylon.

It is just at this time that a new prophetic voice startles the captives by inviting them to join the entire cosmos, earth and heavens, in a celebration of God's comfort, compassion and consolation:

Shout for joy, you heavens; earth, exult!
Mountains break into joyful cries!
For Yahweh has consoled the people,
and has compassion on the afflicted ones.

- Isaiah 49:13

They are incredulous! They can't believe their ears. Is the prophet out of his mind? In what sense can these devastated and abandoned slaves praise God for comfort when there is no comfort? The military and political structures that ended their lives as a free nation are still in place and powerful. Was that not enough evidence that God had forsaken them?

Why do you never remember us, (Yahweh)?
Why do you abandon us so long?

- Lamentations 5:20

Think of the devastated parts of Africa hearing this invitation to a cosmic celebration of God's comfort and compassion. In the movie *Blood Diamond*, one of the characters says when told that God is with them in their struggle, "God left this continent a long time ago." And we all must wonder as we watch the pull out of Iraq, Afghanistan, and the mounting terror in Syria and other terrible situations, "Will God ever forgive us for what we do to one another?" Join in the celebration? Tell it to tormented Haiti while Haitians still feel the aftershocks (of) anguish, the grief, the despair, in their bones.

Can anything else happen to that bewitched, bothered and bewildered country? Yes! It can, just as it has time and again. How can so many and for so long continue to endure what must seem like an absence of God? "Shout for joy, you heavens; earth (Haiti), exult!"

Sure! Pie in the sky! Pigs in a blanket! There are times when I imagine God as a cat playing cruelly with a defenseless mouse. The suffering throughout history of Haiti, Mexico's border country, Africa's teeming refugee camps seem as senseless, as meaningless, as Godless to me as a cat tormenting a mouse.

Zion was saying, "Yahweh has abandoned me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

- Isaiah 49:14

Sometimes our awareness of God is an awareness of God's apparent absence, distance or indifference. And at such times, I face the reality that I am a Christian primarily due to the fact I am attracted to the one we call our Savior because he could honestly muster the courage to say to his Father, "My God, my God, why? Why have you forsaken me?"

The ancient prophet was faced with the same hurdles facing us today. How can the prophet break through the despair and distress of the people? How can they or we be assured of God's compassion? Appeals to logic are useless. There is no logic in human suffering. The employment rate may improve. It may not. Greed, corporate and private, still rules the day. The PNC may work quickly and find the perfect new pastor. Or not. The divorce may or may not be inevitable. The cancer may respond to treatment. Maybe not. Afghanistan can still blow sky high. Earthquakes, floods, tsunamis – they are all part of the risky business of living on this planet (and not God's will!). "Comfort you! Comfort you, my people," says he Lord. How? Is the Lord among us, or not?

Relationships Dominate

Pearl has another son besides Cody. His name is Ezra. Anne Tyler describes him in an ER waiting area. As he waits, he catches himself watching another group of people also waiting for their injured family member to be called and treated. English is obviously a second language for them, and mostly they revert to their native tongue.

Ezra loved to listen. When you couldn't understand what people said, he thought, how clearly the links and joints in their relationships stood out!
A woman's face lit and bloomed as she turned to a certain man; a barbed sound of pain leapt from the patient and his wife doubled over.

And that's it. When the prophet speaks of God's vital presence in the midst of apparent absence, he uses emotive images, or metaphors, of God's relationship to us. Listen.

Can a mother forget her baby at her breast,
(or) feel no compassion for the child in her womb?
- Isaiah 49:15

It is improbable, but not impossible.

And with bold assurance of the links and joints of God's relationship to us, the prophet is courageous enough to suggest that God's face brightens and blooms when God looks at us, that Jesus bends double when we cry out in pain and in suffering. The joints and links of God's relationship to us are so evident, that the Holy Spirit was the first One groaning and weeping when Haiti trembled, shook and fell apart. When you lost your child, when your spouse died, when you divorced and felt you had failed at what you wanted most at which to succeed, when you were betrayed, when the cancer started eating you alive again, when the memories burst through the damned-up emotions again – at all such God-awful times, God was the first one to cry.

(Yes!) even mothers may forget,
Yet I will not forget you.

- Isaiah 49:15

God cannot forget us! God cannot get us out of mind. God is Divine Consciousness conscious of us. God is infinitely and intimately aware of us and of all peoples. God says,

Look, behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands,
your ramparts (your walls, your existence) are ever before me.

- Isaiah 49:16

We are engraved, inscribed, carved, cut, pierced in the Divine Hands of Everlasting Love. God's hands are tattooed with our names.

The Babylonians, who held the Jews captive, tattooed the various names of their gods upon their hands so that they would not forget the claims of their idols. Daily their captives were faced with the names of the foreign gods, a constant reminder of their status as slaves. However, Isaiah takes the custom and, throwing it right back, boldly claims that the One who loves us like a loving and caring mother loves her nursing child has us tattooed on his hands. Like a mother's caesarian scar reminds her of the pain of giving life to her daughter or son, so God is forever marked with signs and scars of love for us.

So, yes! We can join the cosmos in exhalative and celebrative rejoicing over God's present and persuasive love and comfort and justice. We can, in the boldness of hope, celebrate with the heavens and the earth! For what God has prepared for Israel, God has prepared for all people. And as the compassion of much of the world embraces Haiti now, someday, somehow in God's economy all borders will cease to have any meaning whatever. And people will celebrate the links and joints binding them together as all God's children.

Whether or not the circumstances of life are good or bad, regardless of whether we are up or down, imprisoned in the darkness of slavery to one thing or another, trapped in the tiring cycle of a bipolar condition, deep in depression, single and yearning to marry, married and yearning to be single – whatever the context of our captivity – God has us tattooed upon the palms of Christ's hand just as surely as the imprint of the nails are still visible. And we shall be free!

My father was in the United States Navy. He ran away from home, evaded a direct answer about his age and enlisted. He was beautifully tattooed. I was fascinated by the lovely designs and colors, the images and stories each tattoo told. Down one leg was a listing of all the ships upon which he sailed. The other leg carried the ports-of-call into which he sailed. I can't recall the design upon his chest; mother rarely let him take his shirt off around anyone and she refused to go to the beach with him unless he was covered up. On his elbow was a funny face. He lost more than one job because of that face. He worked in a grocery store in Hollywood, California. He was produce manager.

His sleeves were usually rolled up for his work and the face in full view. There was nothing wrong with the face when his arm was straight. But when he bent his elbow, the wrinkles in his elbow and the artistry of the tattoo caused the tongue to come out of the face and stick straight at the very dignified customers of *Safe-Way's* in Hollywood.

But it was the tattoo on his shoulder that was at once the best and most controversial. It was a picture of a beautiful young woman. She looked like my mother. And underneath the picture was my mother's name, Bonnie. Clearly my father was confessing his love to her in a very permanent and public, though unappreciated, manner.

However, as my Daddy got older and older so did the tattoo and the name began to fade ever so gradually; the colors dulling here and there. Finally the day came when it happened. There beneath my mother's name was another woman's name; an earlier woman's name, someone who had claimed his shoulder first. I will not forget the scene that followed my mother's discovery, and it followed for a long, long time.

God does not treat us like that. It is your name in the palm of God all the way down and throughout all eternity!

Amen.