

***In the Shelter of One Another*****May 13, 2018 (Mother's Day)**

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Prayer: O Lord, pour out your Spirit on your sons and daughters, so we may dream, dreams and catch your vision. Speak to us now. Guide us and direct us as we follow Jesus, our Risen Lord, our Brother, our Friend. Amen.

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As today is Mother's Day, I was curious about the maternal images of God found in Scripture. I learned that Second Isaiah, Chapters 40-66, have more mothering language for God than any other part of Scripture. You see, God made us male and female in God's image, so the Bible is filled with a variety of images for God. Words are metaphors, so even when Jesus calls God Father, it is a metaphor for God's role and character, but God is not limited to being like a Father. God is Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Rock, Mother Hen, and Judge. Our words for God, tell us something of God, but no word can tell us everything.

Today we read from Isaiah 49, which is one of the Servant Songs. God's covenant with Israel is that Israel is a light to the nations, and serves God and neighbor. By virtue of faith in Jesus the Christ and Baptism, we, the church, are God's covenant people called to be a Servant people. In today's reading, God's people are living through the Babylonian Exile, far from home, and God is faithful to them even in their exile. God comforts God's children.

Listen to the word of the Lord.

**Isaiah 49:8-16 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)****Zion's Children to Be Brought Home**

<sup>8</sup> Thus says the LORD:

In a time of favor I have answered you,  
on a day of salvation I have helped you;

I have kept you and given you  
as a covenant to the people,<sup>[a]</sup>

to establish the land,  
to apportion the desolate heritages;

<sup>9</sup> saying to the prisoners, "Come out,"  
to those who are in darkness, "Show yourselves."

They shall feed along the ways,  
on all the bare heights<sup>[b]</sup> shall be their pasture;

<sup>10</sup> they shall not hunger or thirst,  
 neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down,  
 for he who has pity on them will lead them,  
 and by springs of water will guide them.

<sup>11</sup> And I will turn all my mountains into a road,  
 and my highways shall be raised up.

<sup>12</sup> Lo, these shall come from far away,  
 and lo, these from the north and from the west,  
 and these from the land of Syene.<sup>[c]</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth;  
 break forth, O mountains, into singing!  
 For the LORD has comforted his people,  
 and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

<sup>14</sup> But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,  
 my Lord has forgotten me."

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands;  
 your walls are continually before me.

We usually think of these verses from 1 Corinthians 13 as wedding scripture or as I have learned, the scripture used by many sororities, but they are words written to a people, God's church, God's covenant community describing how to live together in the bonds of love. While it is appropriate for a marriage or a family, it is really a reminder of how to live also as a community of faith in the world. These words are most relevant in our time.

### **I Corinthians 13:4-13**

<sup>4</sup> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup> or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup> it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup> It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup> Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup> For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup> but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. <sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I

thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. <sup>12</sup> For now we see in a mirror, dimly, <sup>[b]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup> And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

Presbyterian preachers are always taught to preach the text. After all, the authority of Scripture is a cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation. So whether it arbor day, or Veterans Day , or even Mother's day, those are concerns to lift up in the Pastoral Prayer, not the subject of sermon. Scripture alone is the subject of the sermon; however, I do believe today's Scriptures are related to Mother's Day.

Interestingly, Mother's Day is the second most attended services of the year! But Mother's Day is a fairly recent popular phenomenon, thanks to Hallmark and florists. I grew up picking a red rose out of my Grandma's yard to wear to church with her on that Sunday. Some of us remember being given a white or red flower at church to remember our mothers. Red for living. White for deceased.

Mother's Day was founded in 1914 by Ann Jarvis in honor of her mother, Ann Reeves. Anne Reeves Jarvis was remarkable in her own right. She lived in the town of Grafton, WV. She created Mother's Day Work Clubs in five cities to improve sanitation and health conditions around 1858.<sup>i</sup>

Mother's Day Work Clubs also fed, clothed, and treated the wounds of both Union and Confederate soldiers as a means of peacemaking in their Appalachian community. Two years after her own mother died, she campaigned to create Mother's Day. In 1914 the second Sunday in May was established as Mother's Day.

But Ann Jarvis was doing what a woman before her started, and many, many other mothers in the faith.

Have you ever heard of Julia Ward Howe?

If not, you may know her poetry if you have ever sung *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.<sup>ii</sup> She is lesser known for her part in the history of Mother's Day in the United States. Perhaps inspired by the Mothering Day traditions in England and Ireland, in 1870 she wrote the *Mother's Day Proclamation* in response to the carnage of the American Civil war. It was a call for peace. In Britain Mothering Day was a day off for servants and particularly children, who worked in factories and mills. It was a Sabbath, a day of justice, for the poorest to be given the freedom to go home and worship with their mothers.

Women like Howe and Jarvis took on the responsibility to not only influence their homes and families, but to shape society for the better.

Why the history lesson, Preacher? I think these women of faith, mothers to us all, remind us of God's call upon the church, to mother peace, righteousness, and social justice as read in Isaiah. I think the organic roots of Mother's Day do have something to do with our Scripture today. Let's look closer.

God's children feel forgotten, discouraged, and God forsaken. They looked at their lives living as refugees in a strange land and thought this is not what God promised! This is not the Promised Land nor is it Israel our home.

We can look around and see that the world doesn't look like Eden or the Kingdom of God. The world as God intends it is far from our experience. We are living East of Eden and it is hard to see the signs of the Kingdom. God's people are strangers living in a strange land.

Maybe our personal lives are in shambles impacted by grief, pain, or troubled relationships. Some are living in a strange new land even if the house is the same- the same doors you enter and leave, same kitchen table where pay bills and do homework...but living in a strange place, a new reality.

Maybe you are literally in a strange place, having come here to study. Home may feel far away.

I have heard parents of children with disabilities or mental health issues describe it as living a foreign country where you don't speak the language. You have to develop new skills and navigation tools and the map is hard to follow.

So perhaps you and I need these words of comfort, love, hope that God offers in Isaiah 49.

Once you have been in trouble, as God's children, have you have a new compassion and empathy for others especially strangers. It is a common story. The woman who has struggled through breast cancer can offer care to another woman with breast cancer like no one else because she has been there. Or the father who has lost a child can reach out to another father in a way that others cannot because he/she has not lived it. Strangers care for one another.

In the Torah, the books of the Law, the word "stranger" (Heb. *gur*) is used 30 times more than the word for "neighbor." God's children were strangers in a strange land in Egypt when they were slaves. They were wandering in the wilderness as strangers for 40 years after that. Then we read today, they were exiles. God's children were commanded to show love and kindness to strangers for they themselves had been strangers, too. They knew the suffering of being far from home where they could enjoy peace and security. And also maybe the fact that care for strangers is mentioned so much in Torah is because we have always had a hard time loving the stranger!

Remember we worship the God who acts in these situations. God is always faithful to God's promises. Notice that God is the subject of the key verbs here and God's actions are repeatedly stated in personal terms:

I have answered you;  
I have helped you;  
I have kept you;  
I have given you.

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The great I AM is like a Mother who will not forsake her nursing child. The four walls of the house may change, but our names are inscribed on God's hands. We find shelter in one another. We are at home in God's Love.

God is saying, "Wherever you are, I am there." Like Ruth to Naomi, "Wherever you go, I will go." Wherever you go your name is written on my hand.

And God's name is inscribed in our hearts in covenant love.

Our foreheads are crossed with the cross of Jesus. He fills us with his body and blood.

God's Spirit nourished us, strengthens us, carries us, sends us into the world, and uses us for God's loving purposes. God is like a mother who cannot forget her nursing child.

I learn a lot about my role as a mother or parent from God's actions. I am to nourish my children, to prepare them, to send them into the world as Friends of Christ meant to share God's love with others.

We read in Isaiah 49:8: that we are given to be "a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness."

God's covenant people, the Church, is to join God in that mission. Remember God's church does not have a mission. God's mission has a church. We are God's friends and servant people who shine light in darkness and help bring sight and freedom.

We are all mothers, partners in God's transforming love that never ends. We are made in the image of God. God is like a nursing mother cannot forsake or leave us.

Some of us have wonderful mothers or stand in mothers in our lives. Thanks be to God. Other mothers have hurt us or been unable to love us. God have mercy.

Others long to become mothers and cannot. Lord, have mercy.

But God's word today reminds us that we belong to a Mother God who will never leave or forsake us.

No matter where we live, God is the place we came from, our first home, our first love, our first friend, and the one whose love never ends, and therefore, we are never separate. And we know from Scripture that...

God's love is patient; God's love is kind; God's love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. God's Love never ends. (paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13:4-8a)

This is this kind of love we seek to show our children and all our neighbors, strangers included.

How is God calling us to share God's transforming love in this community?

Like Anne Jarvis and Julia Ward How, how is God calling you to work for the common good? To lift up others, and make peace, bring well-being to our community?

One way we did that in our home to shape our children for God's love and service was to offer a blessing at bedtime each night. We entrust our children into God's hands, where are names are inscribed. Crossing each part of their body, we say,

God bless your eyes to see the face of God.

Bless your ears to hear God's Word.

Bless you heart to love the people of God.

Bless your hands to do God's work.

Bless your feet to walk in God's ways.<sup>iii</sup>

So be it. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Some history on Mother's day can be found here at [zinnedproject.org/2014/05/mothers-day-for-peace/](http://zinnedproject.org/2014/05/mothers-day-for-peace/)

<sup>ii</sup> Julia Ward Howe, *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, which some see a march to war, is a text about God's Judgment and that great day of peace everlasting!

<sup>iii</sup> Conrad family blessing which I am sure was borrowed from the great cloud of witnesses who taught us the faith!