

**+ Isaiah 49:13-18 + I Will Not Forget You! + 4th Sunday after Pentecost +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 2 July 2017 +**

Sometimes the praises of God's people don't seem big enough. Not lackluster praises of people just going through the motions, but those times when we're eager to praise God, when we have a church full of people singing at the top of their lungs like on Easter Sunday or Christmas. Yet even then, sometimes the praises of God's people don't seem big enough.

You see, there are times when some truth about our God or some amazing reality about our Savior simply blows us away. You expect that on Christmas when we celebrate Christ's birth or Easter when we celebrate Christ's resurrection or when we celebrated God's grace at the dedication of this place. Yet oftentimes, that amazing reality catches us by surprise.

You're here in worship and something from one of the lessons or some line in a hymn or something the preacher says opens your eyes to a truth you didn't understand before. You're at home spending time with Jesus in his Word and that day's reading helps you see your life in a way you didn't see before. You have an a-ha moment as you step back in awe of who your God is or what he's done or is doing for you—and your praises don't seem big enough.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah seemed to be having one of those a-ha moments as he wrote down the words of our text. Now if you look at the verses before our text, you can imagine the prophet sitting there getting more and more excited. Why? Isaiah was describing the Savior to come. He would be the Lord's servant. He would bring God's people back from exile, but also gather to the Lord souls scattered among the nations. Kings and rulers would bow before him, but the Savior would bring souls out of darkness like a shepherd rescuing his lost sheep and guiding them to the rich pasturelands and living waters of eternal life in heaven.

At that moment, Isaiah practically jumped out of his seat because his praises just weren't big enough for God. The Lord deserved the joyful praises of all creation. ***"Shout for joy, you heavens! Earth, rejoice! Mountains, break into joyful shouts!"*** Why call on the heavens, the earth, even the mountains to shout for joy? ***"For the LORD has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted ones."*** The Lord of free and faithful grace, the God who rescues his people, that God had come to console and comfort his people. The Lord of free and faithful grace, the God who rescues his people, would take pity and have mercy on his suffering people by sending a Savior unlike anyone or anything else they had ever seen.

...But why were God's people suffering? Why did they need God to have compassion on them? Why did they need God's consolation and comfort? You can understand why Isaiah was so eager to get all creation praising his amazing God, but not everybody was so eager to praise God. ***"Zion says, 'The LORD has abandoned me; the Lord has forgotten me!'"***

God's people had a reason for such statements. They had seen the armies of the Assyrian Empire burn the cities of their northern cousins who were then scattered to the four winds. They had seen those same armies burn their way right up to the gates of Jerusalem, of Zion itself with their wicked king mocking God and boasting how he would destroy them. While the Lord did miraculously deliver God's people from the Assyrians, a time was coming when their descendants would face destruction. They would be exiled for 70 years over 1,000 miles away from home with Zion and the temple in ruins.

Even if Isaiah wasn't echoing the thoughts of his people, their exiled descendants surely would've had such thoughts. There's something truly sad about their accusations against God. They used God's saving name—the one he used to remind them that he was their saving God—to point the finger of blame at God. "How can you comfort us, O LORD, when you abandon and forget us?" You can understand why not everyone was as eager as Isaiah to praise God.

So how did the Lord respond? Did he blast them with righteous anger? Did he condemn them for those cries pouring out from the deepest depths of their souls? Did he throw up his hands in resignation? "You're right! I messed up! I let you down when you needed me most. I forgot you..."

Now forgetting comes quite naturally to us. As I get older, I notice that I forget a little more often, especially things from years ago like the name of a band or a person that I haven't thought about in years. The truth is, we all forget! Since forgetting comes so naturally, I wonder if sometimes we're tempted to think that God forgets too. In the course of all the events and people and creatures and processes that the Lord oversees each day, might God forget something or someone...like me? What if God lets me down? What if God doesn't come through when I need him most? What if God forgets?

That's how God's people felt. So how did the Lord of free and faithful grace respond to the fear and worry and uncertainty of his people? He used three images to make his point—a mother nursing her child, tattooed hands, and the gorgeous jewelry that a bride wears on her wedding day.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, or a woman lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you.” Almost no other image displays the true meaning of tender love better than that of a mother gently nursing her child. The hungry cries of her little one cause that mother's heart to well up with compassion, which moves her to act—to soothe her little one, dry his tears, and provide what he needs.

How could a mother forget the child she nurses? How could a mother be cold and heartless towards that child whom she delivered after carrying him within her for nine months? Those little cries usually lead to compassion. God's people knew that back in Isaiah's day. We know that today, but the Lord wants his people to know that he loves them even more. Even if it's possible for a mother nursing her child to forget that child, ***“yet I will not forget you.”***

To emphasize his point even more, the Lord paints an unusual picture. ***“Look, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”*** If God's promise of tender love isn't enough, he wants his people to know that they are always, continually on his mind. Their names, their faces, their lives in every detail are practically tattooed, engraved on the palms of his hands. They're not tattooed on his back or behind his knees or on his elbows or the soles of his feet, but on the palms of his hands where he can see them day or night. ***“You are continually before me.”***

There's no way that God can forget his people! He can't miss us, but if any of you are still worried about being abandoned by God, he promises future joy jewelry. ***“Your builders hurry; those who destroy and devastate you will leave you. Look up, and look around. They all gather together; they come to you. As I live”—this is the LORD's declaration—“you will wear all your children as jewelry, and put them on as a bride does.”***

Those who threatened to destroy Jerusalem would one day be replaced by those who would rebuild her. Centuries after that, God would gather faithful believers from every nation. The joy of God's people gathered together from every nation would be like the gorgeous jewelry a bride wears around her neck on her wedding day. God's Church would not be abandoned, but adorned with beautiful, blood-bought souls from every tribe, nation, and culture.

Now we're not sitting on Zion's walls fearful of coming destruction or watching family members hauled away never to be seen again. So why do we need to hear these words from Isaiah? Why do we need his joy in the Lord?

You may not be sitting on Zion's walls, but do you ever get worried—not just concerned, but doubting that things will work out or assuming that they will go badly and God won't come through? Do you ever feel discontented with your life situation, but every effort you make never seems to fill that hole? Are you ever afraid because you can't control what goes on in your life no matter how hard you try? Are you ever uncertain about the present or the future? How about feeling grief over the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of health, loss of physical and mental capabilities? Do you ever wonder, “Why is this happening to me? To my loved one? Will things in my life ever get better?”

To paraphrase something my bride likes to tell me, do you ever borrow worry? Do you ever unnecessarily take on concern, fear, or uncertainty about things outside of your control, so you lose sleep, get a sick stomach, or develop ill health physically, mentally, or spiritually? We're not sitting on Zion's walls, but we too could be accusing God of abandoning and forgetting us.

Yet does God forget? Does he forget you? Does he forget me? Does a mother forget her nursing child or the love she has for that child? Even if she could, the Lord of everlasting mercy still says, ***“I will not forget you!”***

In fact, God can't forget you! When you were baptized, God put his family name on you, but in doing so, the Lord also tattooed your name on the palms of his hands. But it wasn't just your name! No, he tattooed your life, your joys and sorrows, your past and present and future there, so he could see you all the time every day of your life. As strange as that sounds, God wants you to know that your life and your struggles are always before his eyes. He knows what's going on in your life. He knows where things are headed. Yet God never forgets you! Instead, he guides all things in your life—your joys and blessings, your sorrows and struggles—for your eternal good. He doesn't always answer why this or that happens, but he will never, ever abandon you.

You see, back when the Lord comforted his people through Isaiah, they still had to wait 700 years before that Savior arrived. When Jesus finally did, God proved his promises and fought back against our worry. In fact, as we heard earlier, Jesus spoke directly to those worries. If God provides for the lilies and the birds, how much more does he care about you and me?

That's why Jesus had come. Jesus lived a worry-free life from beginning to end, a life free from uncertainty and fear. As a human he perfectly trusted in the care of his heavenly Father, so that as God he could provide that care for us. Yet Jesus also knew that in order to truly free us from worry, fear, and uncertainty, he had to remove the power behind that worry, fear, and uncertainty. So Jesus went to the cross. Nailed with him were all your worries and my fears and the uncertainty of humanity from Adam and Eve to the Last Day, but it didn't end there. Jesus wipes away our fears with living hope and eternal joy and true peace with God through an empty tomb. Our living Lord tells us, "Why worry about anything? Your past, your present, your future rest in my nail-scarred hands. I will never forget you!"

What else can we do than praise our God? Isaiah was right. Our praises are not big enough for our God who is bigger than our worries. No, for our Savior God, we need the heavens and the earth and the mountains and the forests and the lakes and the cities to shout with joy. ***"For the LORD has comforted his people...I will not forget you! You are ever before me! "And the LORD will have compassion on his afflicted ones."*** O heavens, O earth, O mountains, O people of God, don't worry! Rejoice! Amen.