

God as a Nursing, Tattooed Mother

This is what the LORD says:

"In the time of my favor I will answer you,
and in the day of salvation I will help you;
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people,
to restore the land
and to reassign its desolate inheritances,

to say to the captives, 'Come out,'
and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'
"They will feed beside the roads
and find pasture on every barren hill.

They will neither hunger nor thirst,
nor will the desert heat or the sun beat upon them.
He who has compassion on them will guide them
and lead them beside springs of water.

I will turn all my mountains into roads,
and my highways will be raised up.

See, they will come from afar—
some from the north, some from the west,
some from the region of Aswan. "

Shout for joy, O heavens;
rejoice, O earth;
burst into song, O mountains!
For the LORD comforts his people
and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.

But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me,
the Lord has forgotten me."

"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?
Though she may forget,
I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands;
your walls are ever before me. ---- Isaiah 49:8-16

Sometimes things don't go the way we like them to go. Maybe our lives never went in the direction we had wanted or intended. We wake up one day and realize that our lives have not met our expectations. Or maybe we were sailing through life and things were going splendidly, then we wake up one day and discover that disaster has come like a thief in the night, robbing us of our health, family, or security. What do we do, and where do we turn, when life has been bled of joy and wonder?

This is the question that the writer of Isaiah is addressing in this morning's text. God had promised the people land, security, abundant living, and had assured the people of Israel that they would be a beacon on a hill that would shine brightly for all the world to see. Israel's neighbors would be envious of the fact that the Jews were God's chosen people, and their prosperity would be the evidence that God was with them.

Put the promise and the reality were quite different. The Jews had been conquered by their enemies, their temple destroyed, the people enslaved and scattered. They were hungry and thirsty, both physically and spiritually. Most had given up hope, and they had lost confidence in God and their leaders. Some began to accuse God of abandoning them, while others blamed their spiritual leaders.

When our dreams and hopes vanish away, or worse, when our dreams become nightmares, what do we do, and to whom do we turn to? As a therapist I heard many people blame their parents, other relatives, a spouse, teachers, ministers, and even God. Their lives become embittered, and the poison of blame becomes intoxicating for them. It is so easy to blame others or God for our resentments and life's circumstances, and there is no hope to escape from the disillusionment.

I do not wish for you to hear me as being critical. Indeed for many people life can be painful, and at times placing blame on others, or life's circumstances, or even on God is understandable. But to wallow in it is a surefire way to remain stuck and a guarantee that life will remain a bitter disappointment.

Life can indeed be hard, and we can at times lose our faith and our bearings. We can learn much from our Jewish brothers and sisters who have suffered for thousands of years, especially those who endured the Holocaust of the 20th century. A survivor of the Holocaust whom I deeply admire, Victor

Frankl, once said "Everything can be taken from a man but ...the last of the human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way, cannot be taken from him." Indeed, our attitudes about our circumstances in life are our choices.

The way Frankl and others have successfully coped with suffering was not in wallowing in the pain and casting blame, but instead was through loving and serving others and doing the things that were morally right and life giving. Frankl said "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

I do not want to be flippant or minimize the suffering that many of you have had to endure in life. Suffering is real. Disillusionment is heart wrenching. Having your dreams shattered or never realized is unbearably painful. Yet what we do under those circumstances is ultimately our choice, nobody else's.

So we come back to the question, what do we do, and where do we turn, when life has been bled of joy and wonder, and our hearts grow sad and bitter? We turn to God, who is like a nursing mother, who holds her child to her breast to supply physical, emotional, and spiritual nourishment to her child who is crying and in pain. God will be for us a mother of unfailing love who will not abandon us when we cry in our despair.

But who am I, in a world of 6 billion people, that God will notice me in my pain? God, a nursing mother of love, has my name tattooed on her hand and knows exactly who I am, and exactly who you are as well. Thanks be to God.