

I Have Engraved Your Name on My Hand  
Sermon for the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas

Sermon Text: Isaiah 49:13-16



*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 afflicted. <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, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. <sup>16</sup> Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me.*

What have we done with Christmas? Broken pieces and broken dreams are scattered everywhere. In addition, there are heated arguments in the closest family circles or everyone hides themselves behind a computer, iPad, iPhone, or something else that destroys togetherness. With bored and hopeless eyes, we repeat what happens every year – a Christmas without emotions. This is certainly not how it was meant to be. When I read the Christmas story, I notice that Christmas was and should be an emotional event. We receive a glimpse of heaven as the angels praise and thank God out of joy. We see old Simeon as he embraces the child with his ancient and wiry arms and suddenly, his eyes sparkle with joy like a little child. The same with these hardened shepherds – they throw their staffs and cloaks into the air, leave their sheep in the middle of the night, so that they can see the Christ child. And clearest of all, this deep emotional concern is exhibited by God Himself. He took on the form of a child. He has not only seen through our hearts from far away but took the path of human existence. This tells of a God who is beside Himself with love and horror when His human children are lost. We learn about this concern of our God much earlier than Christmas. Isaiah speaks about a God who cares about us like a mother: "Can a woman forget her nursing child?" he asks. And if she would, Isaiah must add: "God will not forget His children." And in the second picture, God speaks about us as if we were His beloved bride. In the ancient Orient, it was actually common to tattoo the name or picture of a loved one on one's hand. This way, you could always remind yourself of your loved one even when they weren't there. And God says here that He tattooed His children onto His own hands: "Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of My hands." Yes, at Christmas, like at no other time, we look into the heart of God. And our hearts become light and as God's praises are formed on our lips, the angels join in, and we are a big family and a great choir that proclaims praises to God. Do you feel like praising God this Sunday after Christmas? Or do you, like many others, feel sad and disappointed, especially at Christmastime? Our text from the book of Isaiah calls out praises to God. At the same time, he doesn't ignore the fact that God is deeply disappointed with His children. "But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'" Unfortunately, we must realistically acknowledge that we can't clearly see this loving God to whom we are so dear. No, instead, there is the loud voice of Satan, war and battle cries, murder and killing

wherever you look. We know very well this old language of suffering and feeling forsaken by God. After all, this is what our world looks like.

It was already like this at the birth of Jesus. The Christ child was not protected from all suffering and harm in this world. There is no reception in a palace. And He is not laid in soft garments but must settle for hard straw among stinking oxen and cows. Christmas is portrayed in opposites. On the one hand, we see the chief of angels announcing the birth of the Lord. On the other hand, the child must adapt to the political conditions of the time and, because of a ridiculous census, not only have to be content without an inn but also flee from King Herod for fear of death.

“The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” That’s what it looked like – wasn't it? What does Jesus, the Son of God, eventually call out on the cross? “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?!” And if we now take our experiences or the experience of many Christians who are persecuted, some people don’t feel like praising and giving thanks at all: “The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.” Don’t you get this feeling often? Of course! That’s why it’s already in the Bible! Israel knows this feeling. Jesus knows this feeling and perhaps we do too. The question is: What do we do with this feeling?

First, we may complain about all the suffering of the world. But it cannot stay that way. God doesn’t let our speech, crying, and complaining go unanswered. He speaks to us in our suffering and sadness. And God speaks with very understandable words: <sup>15</sup>“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” We can understand that, right? Aside from tragic exceptions, mothers will never abandon their children. We know something about this. God will never abandon us, He says. He will have mercy upon us. By the way, the word mercy in the original text means that the womb is the place of love and care. Where a mother might neglect her responsibility at some point, God will never do that. And then again, this picture of a loved one engraved on one’s hand. What a wonderful and practical picture God shows us here. God doesn’t sit far away in His heavenly paradise and forget about us. No, He has your picture and my picture permanently tattooed on His hand. He thinks about us and misses us when we go on the wrong path.

We often don’t understand that when combined with our experiences of suffering and death: but that’s exactly why God says it! HE doesn’t have to tell us what we know from experience. We already know it. He shows us and tells us about this completely different picture of the loving God who can’t hold back His love. God looks in love upon His people like a mother looks at her child or a lover looks at his beloved. Perhaps it is difficult for us to know God’s love. Perhaps it is difficult for us to understand His Words and for them to enliven our hearts. We are so firmly anchored and bound to our fate in life that our eyes can’t see what God says to us in His Word. All of our hope and joy are based on what we can get here in our lives. All our hope is eventually connected to the words of a judge who, in a German court, takes the law in hand to say: “you may stay in Germany.”

God wants to encourage us to look further into His Word. He wants us to see the Words of the Eternal God. God always sees further than what can give us immediate joy. God wants to show us that we are called to be in heaven. We are called to see God’s love face to face. Only then will we understand why the shepherds and everyone else at that time were so full of joy. Amen.