

Palm Reader

Isaiah 49:8-16a

Whitefish UMC

May 25, 2008

- † Annie Wilson, played by Cate Blanchett in the movie *The Gift*, reads palms and tarot cards to supplement her government check that she receives after the tragic death of her husband. Annie has three children to support. She doesn't go in for mumbo jumbo. She has a gift—her grandmother had it and so does she.
- † Annie uses her gift for good. She cares about her clients and stands by them, even when it gets her in trouble. And because the film is a southern Gothic thriller, her gift and her compassion and steadfastness almost prove to be her undoing.
- † Annie's life is one of disappointments. Not only has she lost her husband, but she sometimes fails to save her clients and friends from themselves. New love opens up to her only to be twisted by murderous revenge. She has every reason to feel forgotten and alone.
- † Of course it's only a movie, right? But even though our lives might not be quite that dramatic, most of us have felt a similar sense of abandonment and loss. Maybe the husband or wife who promised to love and cherish you until death did not keep that promise.
- † Perhaps the child in whom you invested so much of yourself shows little appreciation. Did the boss who painted such a rosy picture for you of your prospects with the company sell you down the river when the merger came? Did a pastor disappoint you? Were you a victim of abuse?

- † Maybe the biopsy you prayed so hard about came back positive for cancer, and you watched in agony as a dear loved one wasted away. If you've ever experienced any of these hard places, did you cry out to God as did the ancient Israelites: "The Lord has forsaken me? My Lord has forgotten me."
- † Some 700 years before the birth of Jesus, God's people, the Israelites, were being battered into submission by powerful enemies. Her leaders were exiled into foreign lands, and there was every reason to despair. God, it seemed, had abandoned the promise to them of fulfillment and abundant blessing.
- † Of course it wasn't just the ancient Israelites who felt abandoned and forgotten by God. Jesus himself, in the agony of the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"
- † I wonder if he could somehow then recall the words of assurance from Isaiah that we heard this morning: "In a time of favor I have answered you, on a day of salvation I have helped you..."
- † Even Jesus needed reminding of God's unshakable commitment to him. And so do we. Isaiah reminds us with an image that is indelible. As long as you live and breathe, God cannot desert you.
- † Is a mother with a tiny nursing baby capable of deserting that child? It's almost impossible, although it does happen. The bond between mother and baby is perhaps the strongest human tie. But even though a mother could desert a child, unlikely as it may be, God cannot fail you, right?
- † Yet many of us feel that God has disappointed us. J. B. Phillips, in his little book, *Your God is Too Small*, writes: "To some people the mental image of God is a kind of blur of disappointments. 'Here is

One whom I trusted, but He let me down.’ The rest of their lives is consequently shadowed by this letdown.

- † Thenceforth there can be no mention of God, Church, religion, or even parson, without starting the whole process of association with its melancholy conclusion: God is Disappointment.”
- † Add to this feeling of disappointment a creeping sense that God is simply absent, nonexistent, or doesn’t care. And there you have what has been known throughout the centuries as the “dark night of the soul.”
- † Somehow Isaiah found an image that could illustrate dramatically God’s unchanging, everlasting, steadfast love for us. Even in the eighth century B.C. E., young men customarily did what they still do today (as well as young women, now).
- † As an expression of their endless love, they tattooed the name of their true love on the arm or on some other part of the anatomy. Of course young (and old) people of every age have discovered to their chagrin that romantic love does not always last as long as the tattoo.
- † But God’s love, unlike that of humans, is never fickle. It is constant, unquenchable, and persistent. It is as though your name is tattooed on God’s very hands. Even though I disappoint and desert God, that tattoo on God’s hand is indelible.
- † Most of our relationships are performance based. If we perform well, we are appreciated. If we fail, not so much. But in Christ Jesus, we have a friend—the only one—who can stand the full truth of what we are and still keep on loving without counting the cost.
- † Bill Bouknight writes: “No new evidence will ever be charged against us that was not presented at Calvary and silenced forever.

Decisions we make can take us out of God's will but never out of God's reach.

- † As St. Paul wrote to Timothy long ago, 'If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.'" Wow.
- † I remember the first time I really heard and started to believe the words of Isaiah and Paul—the words about being carved into God's palm. It was shortly after my parents divorced in 1983 after being married for thirty-seven years. Our own marriage teetered on the brink of divorce. I was in my thirties, struggling to make my mark in my career and feeling that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't measure up to everyone's and my own expectations.
- † I was learning to cope with my parents' divorce when my dad, a devout Roman Catholic, had my parents' marriage annulled—in the eyes of his church, it had never existed. And even though we were assured that it wasn't the case, didn't that mean that their children didn't exist, too?
- † It's easy to look back now and realize how silly that notion was. But I needed a reminder. And in a Cursillo weekend in our town's Roman Catholic parish, someone gave me this verse, written on a cut-out hand palm, that struck a chord.
- † No matter how forgotten I felt, God would remember me—I was carved in the palm of God's hand. And what a difference that made to me.
- † A few years later, our son Carey gave me the book *The River Why*, by David James Duncan. And the image made even more sense and held even more power for me.

- † At one point toward the end of the book, the main character, Gus, is talking to Nick, an older man who had been making fishing rods and tying flies with him for some months in his little cabin in a remote part of Oregon. Just before Nick moves away, Gus gets up the nerve to ask Nick about the scar on one of his palms. In front of a warm fire, Nick tells his story.
- † He served on a mine sweeper in the North Sea during World War II. He told Gus about how much he hated the chaplain who was always spouting off pious words of faith to him. Nick couldn't be less interested in such stuff.
- † Then he told of encountering a huge storm that tossed the relatively little ship like a cork on a pond. After a sleepless night of being tossed about, Nick got up for duty just as day was breaking. They had steered a course into the lee of the Norwegian mountains to wait out the storm.
- † Suddenly, about a mile off the coast, they hit a floating mine, blowing the front of the hull away and sinking the ship with most of its crew in minutes. Nick ended up in the water, more or less in shock and soon numb from the cold water.
- † Eventually a big trawler appeared and after taking on a number of the survivors, Nick saw a man with a short, stubby fishing pole cast his line out past him. He could see the line but he couldn't feel it, nor could he grasp it, for there was no feeling in his hands.
- † As the line was being reeled in, the bobber moved by him and he tried to enfold his body around it, but could not hold on. Then he saw it—a five inch, heavy gauge hook. The ship was pulling away, and it was his last chance.

- † As best he could he held the point of the hook against his palm, waiting for the line to come taut...it did, and mercifully he soon blacked out, as he was literally reeled into the boat.
- † Gus found out where the scar on Nick's hand came from, a scar that was the remaining evidence of how he was hauled to safety on that cold, dreadful night. And that experience had changed Nick's life. Listen to his final words to Gus:
- † "It isn't that it would have been so bad for me to drown...what scares me, what makes me happy, is what I'd have died believin' then, compared to what I'll die believing now...I don't know how to put it. I'm still not religious, never will be.
- † But since that hook pierced me the world hasn't been the same. I just didn't know anything, nothing at all, till God let me watch that line run away from me, my hands all powerless an' cold. You're young, Gus. I don't know if you've been to that place beyond help or hope.
- † But I was there on the sea that day. And I was sent the help unlooked for, an' it came in the shape of a hook. An' nothin' will ever be the way it was before that day, not for me it won't..."
- † Why is it that it is often the most hopeless places that become the path to our connection with God? I don't know—perhaps it's because all the distractions and false hopes are taken away.
- † But often we are forced to make some tough choices and decisions in the midst of our despair, trusting that God will honor the risks and the pain. Only you know what those risks are for you. For Nick it was facing certain pain, and it left a scar.

- † For Jesus it was facing death on the cross, and that, too, left wounds in his palms and feet and side. Yet out of such trust in God's faithfulness comes our salvation.
- † Remember Isaiah's words in chapter 49. He said, "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. See, I have carved you on the palms of my hands..."
- † In youth group, I've seen the kids write down a phone number they don't want to forget on their hands. In Taize last week, new friends wrote down email addresses on their hands.
- † But no matter what stormy seas toss your life, your name can't be washed away from the palm of God's hand. Not even the most Gothic of trials and troubles and mayhem can prevent God from reading your name inscribed on the divine hand.
- † And that's no mumbo-jumbo. It's a gift. Take God's hand. And even if *you* let go, God won't. Amen.

Sources:

David James Duncan, *The River Why*. Bantam, 1984.

Dr. Bill Bouknight, "Written on God's Hand," www.esermons.com

Paul E. Robinson, "Traveling Forgotten Mountains," www.esermons.com

Roger Ebert, "The Gift," <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com>