

## EPIPHANY: A TIME TO CELEBRATE GOD'S GIFT FOR ALL PEOPLE

### Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 27, 2011

Psalm 131

Isaiah 49:8-16a

I Corinthians 4:1-5

Matthew 6:24-34

### Feeling Alone? God has a Promise for You

From time to time most of us have the experience of feeling completely alone. Perhaps several problems arise at once and suddenly everything seems to come crashing down around us. Family members may be at a distance and friends occupied with their own issues. There may be people around us, but not individuals in whom we would confide or seek out for counsel and advice.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah pictures the people of Judah when they were experiencing such a period in their national life. They were in exile in Babylon. Their homeland had been devastated and Solomon's Temple, their central and glorious place of worship, had been desecrated and destroyed. No one among them could find cause for anything but despair. Although the reading begins with God telling his people: "When the time comes to save you, I will show you favor and answer your cries for help" (Isaiah 49:8 GNT), at that moment they had no hope. Their response was: "The LORD has abandoned us! He has forgotten us" (Isaiah 49:14 GNT).

How utterly desperate the people must have felt to believe that God had abandoned them. They could quote the words of their Psalmist King, promising God's presence even in the valley of the shadow of death. Yet for them God was nowhere to be found. Or so it seemed.

Upon hearing their cry, God responds with words of assurance and comfort. In verse 15 God asks, "Can a woman forget her own baby...?" There are few things more unnatural in this world than a mother forgetting to love and care for her child. Yet God declares that even if such a thing should happen, "I will never forget you." No qualifications. No exceptions. We do not read, *if you love me, I will not forget you*. We do not read, *if you keep my commandments, I will never abandon you*. These people were in exile precisely because they had forgotten to love God and keep his commandments, but God had not forgotten them. They were in exile for the purpose of bringing them to their senses, to repentance, so that God could restore them to a life of blessing and joy.

The final verse from our lesson, verse 16, states: "I can never forget you!" Not, *I will not, but I can not*. God says it is not possible for him to forget us.

The lectionary directs us to end our reading with the first half of verse 16, but let me call your attention to how this verse ends: “I have written your name on the palms of my hands.” (GNT). God cannot forget us because our names are written on his hands. The KJV says, “I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.” Other translations use words like “inscribed” and even “carved.” The Hebrew can literally mean “to cut.”

Think about that. When you have a cut on the palm of your hand, every time you use your hand, flex the muscles, grip anything to pick it up – you irritate the cut and it hurts. You don’t forget about it very easily. You both see and feel what is engraved upon your palm.

So God makes his point. He does not forget his people. Once we have given our lives to God and have become his children, we are never really alone. This is God’s promise to us: “I can never forget you! I have written your name on the palms of my hands.”

This week’s Reflection was prepared by The Rev. Thomas R. May, Director of Content Quality Assurance for the Eugene A. Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship at American Bible Society.

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**This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Chile** – with thanks to God for the Area Board and Bible Societies who, after last year’s earthquake and tsunami, provided resources to help repair our infrastructure, print 200,000 Portions, and provide Bibles for survivors; and with prayers for their family support, drug-prevention, and literacy projects; also pray that the Women’s World Day of Prayer theme, “How Many Loaves do you Have?” will have far-reaching impact, and that the Society will be able to prepare a special Portion for women; **Argentine** – with thanks to God for the *Bible and Culture* project, which gave every public library a Bible, and for the progress of the Indigenous Literacy project; and with prayers for the growth of our volunteers’ work, for the fulfillment of *He Speaks Our Language*, focusing on the production and distribution of Scripture materials among indigenous people, and for efforts to research and develop new Bible formats for the youth market.

### **Activity Corner: “God’s Promise Box”**

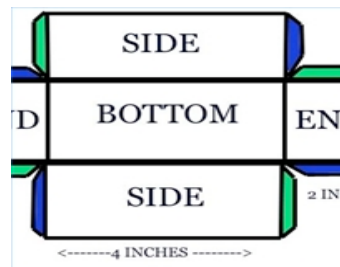
Supplies needed: Bible, cardstock paper, glue, markers, pens or pencils, ruler, strips of white paper, crayons

As in Isaiah 49 where God promises Israel that he will never forget them, the Word of God is filled with God’s promises to those who trust in him. Take some time to reflect on some of those promises. Invite each participant to mention at least one and write them on the strips of white paper provided. Examples of God’s promises include: eternal life; protection; needs being supplied. Afterwards, engage participants in a discussion on whether each item is conditional or unconditional. For example, point out that the promise of eternal life depends on whether we maintain a relationship with God. Then, instruct participants to work in groups to make a promise box. Give each group a set of supplies needed and the instructions set out below. When

the boxes are complete, use the markers to label them, “God’s Promises,” and then insert the strips of paper on which they had written the promises. Participants should be encouraged to read them often.

### Instructions:

1. Measure out the pattern onto the paper using a ruler. Each long side will be 4 inches long, and each short side will be 2 inches long. Draw out the pattern on your paper as you measure, remembering to include the tabs marked in green and blue in the pictured diagram. You don't need to color these tabs on your own pattern. (See diagram below)



2. Cut out the shape with scissors. Help younger children with this step. Be careful when cutting out your pattern so that you include the tabs. The tabs are important for helping secure the box. After the shape is cut out, fold in the tabs. Fold up the ends and the side and press the crease so it makes a clean fold.
3. Place a squirt of glue onto each green tab, and press it together with the blue tab next to it. Your tabs won't be colored, so keep a copy of the pattern next to you if you're confused. Glue all of the tabs together and let the entire box dry for about 30 minutes. Once the box is dry, color it or paint it however you choose.