

“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life. Fear not, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you. I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Do not withhold; bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

A young couple are strolling together through the park. Feeling the closeness of the moment, one of them reaches out to take the hand of the other, as they continue their walk—no longer so much two people walking side by side, but they are hand in hand, feeling that they are one in body, in heart and in mind.

Several years pass. Now that couple is standing hand in hand before the altar, making their vows of love and faithfulness to one another in the Lord’s presence. As they do this, their parents, sitting in the front pews also reach out hands to one another—perhaps remembering their own wedding day; finding love and comfort in the closeness of one another.

Still more years. It seems that they don’t hold hands as often as they used to, because they are now holding the hands of their children, who continue to reach out to them for love, for comfort, for help and for protection. Mom holds her son’s hand as the boy goes off to begin his first day of school. Dad holds the hand of his daughter, who still can’t cross the street on her own. Maybe they hold that hand in a crowded mall or in the midst of a thunderstorm. But what a joy it is for both parent and child to feel the love, the closeness and the safety that is in that touch.

As time marches on, mom and dad have time to hold hands a bit more. They reach out for one another, mindful of the many things—both good and bad—that they have faced together with the help of God. The children are grown and leaving home. Health starts to fail. Now one is lying sick and dying, with the other reaching out that same, loving hand to comfort, to assure their spouse that they love them and are with them. And they both feel reassured as they sit there, hand in hand.

There is something special about the feeling that comes from being hand in hand with someone you love and who loves you; of holding on to someone you care about, and who cares about you. If we find great joy and comfort in that human touch, then surely there must be an even greater sense of love and peace that comes from being hand in hand with our Lord and God as we go through the cares of life. As Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized, He comes to take His place beside sinful mankind. He comes to reach out His hand to us—the hand of comfort, love and care. The wonderful blessing that God gives us is that, through our Baptism, we feel our hand placed in His, as the Father of love and grace holds on to us to lead us through all things that we must face in our lives.

One of the more popular funeral hymns, especially among the older Germans, says: *“Lord, take my hand and lead me along life’s way; direct, protect, and feed me from day to day. Without your grace and favour I go astray; so take my hand, O Saviour, and lead the way.”* (LSB 722, st. 1) In the midst of the realities of life and perhaps even more in the face of death, it is good to know that our God holds our hand and that He leads us, directs us, protects us. That is the promise of our Baptism, for in that blessed Sacrament, God takes hold of us. He marks us as His own. He calls us by name. God the Holy Spirit fills us and dwells in us, touching us with His grace, so that we keep a tight grip on the hand that God holds out to us.

But there are times—and it may even seem that there are far too many times—when we feel that God is far from us, rather than being with us, holding our hand. We may start to doubt the Lord’s care, especially when we realize how little we deserve to have our hand in His. In the verses before our text, Isaiah reminds the people of Israel: *“Who gave up Jacob to the looter, and Israel to the plunderers? Was it not the LORD, against whom we have sinned, in whose ways they would not walk, and whose law they would not obey? So he poured on him the heat of his anger and the might of battle; it set him on fire all around,*

but he did not understand; it burned him up, but he did not take it to heart.” We know, even though we don’t like to admit it, that we are sinful people. We don’t take God’s Word to heart as we should. We don’t listen as we should. We don’t do what we should. We deserve His anger, because we sin against Him. God cannot–nor will not–leave sin unpunished.

And yet, the words of our text today bring us great promise. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says to us: ***“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*** Yes, we are sinful. No, we don’t deserve God’s goodness. But that hasn’t kept God from reaching out to us in His love. In fact, the words of our text remind us of the lengths that God will go to because of His love for us. Isaiah speaks of the things that God did for the people of Israel, whom He had chosen as His own; the people who did not hold on to the hand of God, but who turned away to grab onto other gods. God disciplined His people. He let them experience the pain of life apart from Him. But God also came to their rescue. He brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Later, when they were again captives in Babylon, God raised up Cyrus of Persia, who conquered their enemies and allowed them to return home and rebuild the temple. God gave those nations as a ransom for His people, that they may again walk hand in hand with Him.

We are the ones who let go of the hand of God to grab onto other things we think are so important; things we think will bring us satisfaction. But they disappoint us, leaving us alone and empty. Thankfully, God continues to reach out to us in His love and grace. He remembers the promises He made to us in our Baptism. He remembers that He has called us by name and that we are His. He reaches out His hand to us. The hand that God extends to us is the hand of the Saviour. It is the hand that touched a leper, who had long forgotten the warmth of human touch, and which brought healing to that man. It is the hand that touched the eyes of a blind man so that he could see, and which touched the ears of a deaf man and opened them to the joy of sound. It is the hand that reached out to lift Peter out of the water when he began to sink in fear at the wind and waves. It is the same hand that was stretched out over the wind and wave as the Lord commanded them to be still. It is the hand that held the bread and wine that were shared with the wonderful promise of the Lord who can give what He says: “This is my body; this is my blood”. It is the hand that bears the mark of the nails that held His hands to a cross as He paid the ransom that buys us back from sin, from death and from the torment of hell that we deserve. It is the hand raised in a blessing of peace after His resurrection.

In His Son, and through His death and resurrection, God says to us: ***“For I, the LORD your God, hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, “Fear not, I am the one who helps you.””*** (Isaiah 41:13, ESV) The God who created us, who gives us life as His children through our Baptism, and who ransoms us from our enemies of sin, death and hell is the God who holds our hand to lead us through the worries and cares of this world, whether it is COVID or cancer or any other crisis. Hand in hand with Him, we feel comfort in the closeness of His love. We feel calm and peaceful in the midst of life’s struggles. Hand in hand with Him, we can pass through the flood of cares and concerns as the people of Israel did when they crossed the Red Sea. Hand in hand with God, we face the fires of life as did Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who were tossed into the fiery furnace. Day by day, through the ups and downs of life, we walk hand in hand with God. He protects us. He comforts us. Blessed to be united with Him through our baptism into His death and the forgiveness it brings, and united in His resurrection and the life that is ours, we walk hand in hand with our Lord, who brings us to the rest and peace of His eternal home. Amen.