

# Forget-me-not

sermon digest

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Isaiah 49:8-16

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Each day when I sit down at my computer, I am presented with a whole assortment of ways to make my voice heard on issues that I take seriously. Over the last few years, my list of opportunities has grown from just a handful to a number of organizations that write to tell me that I am not alone in my concerns and that my one voice does matter. My cheering squad ranges from Bread for the World to Oxfam and Amnesty International to the Friends Committee on National Legislation, Church World Service's Speak-Out, the National Council of Churches' Faithful America, Friends of the Earth, Earth Day Network, ONE.org, and others.

This past week I began receiving encouragement from all directions to contact my U.S. Senators concerning the debate beginning tomorrow on climate change. From all sides I was told that this was a momentous occasion that could change the course of history. "Will the Senate take meaningful action against climate change?" the Friends Committee on National Legislation asked. "Will it set in motion legislation to put a price on carbon emissions and launch a new, energy efficient, renewable energy economy? Will it reduce emissions deep enough and fast enough to prevent harm to current and future generations? Will it do so in a fair and just manner for all people, both at home and abroad?"

The decision, my correspondents assured me, hangs in the balance. Yes, it depends on how much pressure special interests groups place on the senators; but it also depends, my friends say, on me and whether or not I make my views known.

Even as I read the messages coming up on my computer screen, I heard naysayers on the evening news, certain that nothing will change. Congress, they suggest, is too partisan, too focused on campaign chests and the next election to take decisive action. And then there are the experts from opposing think tanks who assure us that it is all too complex anyway. Much like the arguments raised over the abolition of slavery, the legalization of trade unions, the imposition of a minimum wage, the elimination of child labor, the institution of mandatory school attendance and on and on and on—our country, the argument goes, should not take action until other countries take action lest we be priced out of the world market.

So which is it? Are those of us who are concerned for the environment tilting at windmills? Are we merely being naive and unrealistic? Must we bide our time even as we hear disturbing forecasts about what the future holds? Must we tell those already suffering from food shortages due to drought, floods, rising fuel and fertilizer costs and the utilization of grain for biofuel that they will just have to wait?

We have completed the first half of the Christian year. We have passed through the waiting of Advent and Lent and the gloriously hopeful celebrations of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. Moving into what we call "Ordinary Time," is it time for us to moderate our hopes and expectations or, at best, put them on the shelf until next year? Is it time to adjust to things as they are and always will be? Where is the transformation, the peace, the justice about which we have sung? Where is the kingdom of God we proclaim Jesus has brought into our midst?

Last summer when our family was visiting, we loaded all four of the grandchildren and our daughter and son-in-law into the car for a tour of the Smokies. After almost two hours in the car, we tumbled out at the Chimneys picnic area for lunch. We spent maybe an hour climbing the rocks and enjoying the cool water and then loaded back into the car to continue our exploration. A faulty reading of the map sent us on a long goose chase, which unfortunately took us out of the park and on a long, long trail home. As the four children became increasingly hysterical and the parents and grandparents exasperated, Nathan, from the very back seat, piped up with an appropriate question. "So this is it?" One brief hour of having our feet on solid ground—that was going to be the extent of our enjoyment of the Smokies?

Is this *it*? Is this the best we can hope for in this world? Do we just turn our attention to taking care of things close at hand and hope for the best?

***We are anchored in the memory of God.*** Uncertainty before creeping or seemingly nonexistent progress is not new. Some three thousand years ago, Moses, frustrated by the hunger and accusations of the Hebrew people in the wilderness, fairly shouted to God: "Why have you laid the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them?" [Num. 11:11-12]. Four hundred years later a people was weary of exile, homesick and heartsick at the thought that the place they called home lay in desolation and ruins. Zion, Isaiah tells us, wept bitterly, "The LORD has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me" [Is. 49:14]. And Jesus himself cried from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Mt. 27:46]. A sense of being forgotten by God strikes cold fear in our hearts. A people of faith, stripped of its reason to hope, convinced that its hope, indeed, is in vain, is a people, in Paul's words, "most to be pitied" [1 Cor. 15:19]. It would have been better, it seems, to have kept a grip on reality and never hoped at all.

God's response to the people's cry in Isaiah is interesting. There is no denying that the situation is bad. The

devastation is real, and the people's cause for grief is real. But appearances do not tell the whole story. "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?" Isaiah reports God as asking. "Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me" [49:15-16].

The situation is real, but so is the reality of God's eternal *hesed* or steadfast, dependable love. Isaiah picks up a note he sounded earlier when he spoke of the faithful who "will write on the hand, 'The Lord's'" [44:5], signifying the source of their hope and identity. Only now the situation is reversed, and it is God writing upon God's hand "Zion." Like the *tephillim* or prayer box the faithful strapped to their wrists as a reminder of the God who had called them [Deut. 6:8], Isaiah's message is that God wears the name of God's faithful people indelibly stamped upon God's hand. "I *will not*," God says, "forget you. In spite of all of the uncertainties, the disappointments, the evidences to the contrary, you can bank on that."

**God's covenant embraces the whole world.** What then should we do? How should we proceed? Isaiah's second Servant Song, our passage for today, gives us some pointers. We take our cue from God. If we rest upon the faithfulness of God, we must be faithful to the calling we have received from God. We must turn aside any hint that hope must be abandoned or that we must pull in the walls of our tent and turn our hands to more manageable, more achievable goals. "It is too light a thing," the Servant Song insists, that we should turn our attention to "taking care of our own." We should, of course, take care of our own, but our mission, our calling, is much larger than that. "I will give you," Isaiah cites God as saying, "as a light to the nations," as "as a covenant to the people" [49:6, 8].

The situation, indeed, is serious. We are legitimately concerned over the world's rising food crisis and the deaths of over two million people annually from lack of access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Add to this the fact that the United Nations has raised its forecast on population growth from the current level at 6.7 billion to 9.2 billion people by the year 2050, and the situation looks grim indeed.

As a people of faith, we, like the rest of our world, are confronted with options. We can resign ourselves to being forgotten by God and hopeless before such an enormous challenge. Convinced that a conflagration is unavoidable, we can wall off the borders of our hearts and nation to current need and future crises. It will happen, we tell ourselves; and we must "eat, drink and be merry" while we can, contenting ourselves with tending to our own gardens. Or we can take seriously the challenge of a God who remembers and who calls upon us to remember the wideness of the covenant to which we are called, and get to work.

In the 1940's a young nun walked through the streets of Calcutta, a city hard hit by famine, followed by the horror of Hindu/Muslim violence, and experienced a call that though it did not end all the suffering, brought dignity and peace to a population most had consigned as beyond all hope. In the 1950's Martin Luther King faced the prospects of raising his children under the limiting, intimidating ceiling imposed upon black people in a segregated South; and he invested his life in turning the seemingly immovable wheel of history toward fairness and equity. In 2007 Buddhist monks took to the streets of Myanmar to protest the ruling military government; today they minister to the needs of the Burmese people in the face of the overwhelming disaster that has left 134,000 dead or missing and 2.4 million survivors struggling with hunger and homelessness.

That's what people of faith do. They don't deny the reality. Faithful to the God whose memory is always an active part of the living present, they dare to hope and work.

If you want to know where the people of God will be in the ecological crisis facing our world, look for those who are investing their hopes and energies in meeting the crisis with the best God-given resources at their disposal. They won't all look alike or sound alike or hawk the same solutions. But they are living out their covenant. They are God's gift to the world—all the world.