

PSALMS OF HOPE

@UnitedChurchFerndown



United Church Ferndown's 2023 Lent Programme

Sunday 12th March
Lent 3

Sermon+

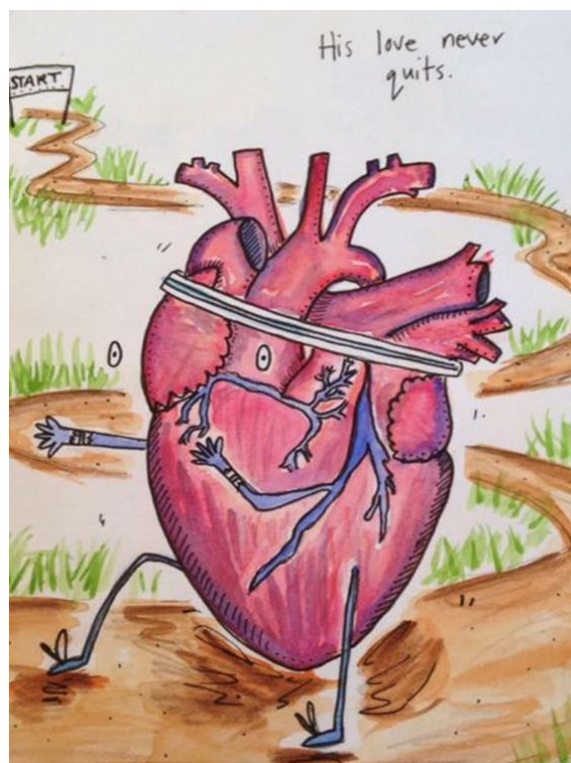
Psalm 118:14-24

THE LOVING HAND OF GOD



Pray:

We come before the God who inhabits our world and indwells our lives. We need not look up to find God, we need only to look around: within ourselves, beyond ourselves, into the eyes of another. We need not listen for a distant thunder to find God, we need only listen to the music of life, the words of children, the questions of the curious, the rhythm of a heartbeat, the revelations found in his word. Be with us now as we explore this psalm some more. **Amen.**



Introduction:

William Gladstone, in announcing the death of Princess Alice to the House of Commons, told a touching story. The little daughter of the princess was seriously ill with diphtheria. The doctors told the princess not to kiss her little daughter and endanger her life by breathing the child's breath. Once, when the child was struggling to breathe, the mother, forgetting herself entirely, took the little one into her arms to keep her from choking to death. Rasping and struggling for her life, the child said, 'Momma, kiss me!' Without thinking of herself, the mother tenderly kissed her daughter. She got diphtheria and some days thereafter she went to be forever with the Lord. Real love forgets self. Real love knows no danger. Real love doesn't count the cost. The Bible says, 'Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it' (Song of Songs 8:7).



Read: Psalm 118:14-24 (NIV)

The Lord is my strength and my defence;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ Shouts of joy and victory

resound in the tents of the righteous:

'The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!

¹⁶ The Lord's right hand is lifted high;

the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!

¹⁷ I will not die but live,

and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

¹⁸ The Lord has chastened me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates of the righteous;
I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.

²⁰ This is the gate of the Lord

through which the righteous may enter.

²¹ I will give you thanks, for you answered me;
you have become my salvation.

²² The stone the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;

²³ the Lord has done this,

and it is marvellous in our eyes.

²⁴ The Lord has done it this very day;
let us rejoice today and be glad.

A consideration of the psalm:

Let's start with some questions...

- What's the shortest chapter in the Bible? Psalm 117 (2 verses)
- What's the longest chapter in the Bible? Psalm 119 (176 verses)
- Which is the central chapter of the Bible? Psalm 118! There are 594 chapters before Psalm 118, and 594 chapters after Psalm 118. So, the middle chapter of the Bible comes between the shortest and the longest chapters.
- What's the middle verse of the middle chapter of the Bible? There are 29 verses in Psalm 118, so the middle verse is v15. So, the central verse of all scripture speaks of the power of God's hand.

But before we look at God's hands, let us look at ours... What are some of the things that we do with our hands? Hopefully, your answer is immediately: wash them! We have just gone through a pandemic. But thinking beyond that, some of the things that we do with our hands reveal who we are: signature, handshake, etc. Just the expressions we use about hands reveal our character: someone may be even-handed, meaning trustworthy, being fair and impartial; they may be open-handed, meaning that they're generous; they may have clean hands or dirty hands, regarding a

matter of integrity; they may have clenched hands, speaking of an aggressive spirit; or they may have praying hands, speaking of devotion to God.

To help us understand what scripture means by the expression 'the hands of God', he's given every one of us two of them, not only to help us get done the things of life that we need to do, but as visual aids to help us understand how he accomplishes his purposes, not just functionally, but as an expression of his identity. Hands are such a gift from God, because though God's thoughts are so much higher than our thoughts, and God's ways are so much higher than our ways, through our own experience of having hands, using hands, and being on the receiving end of other people's hands, we can then understand that to place ourselves into the hands of God is to put ourselves into the centre of not only how God does things, but also how he expresses his character, his attributes and his identity, of which there are so many facets:

- An expression of his power like in these words in the song of Moses: 'Your right hand, O Lord, was majestic in power. Your right hand shattered the enemy' (Exodus 15:6). Before that, in Exodus 6:6, God told Moses: 'Therefore, say to the Israelites: "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment".'
- His creativity, like in these words of praise: 'The heavens declare the glory of the Lord; the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Psalm 19:1).
- His sovereignty, like in these words: 'Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?' (Isaiah 40:12). If you need further proof of God's sovereignty let's go to chapters 38 to 41 in the book of Job. This is a powerful demonstration of God's sovereignty. He begins by asking Job 'Where were you when I created the ends of the earth?' (Job 38:4).
- His compassion, as in these words of reassurance: 'Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you: I will uphold you with my righteous right hand' (Isaiah 41:10).
- His righteousness, as in these words of warning: 'It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Hebrews 10:31).
- His perseverance with our obstinacy: Isaiah 65:2 says 'All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations.'

Having seen what God's hands mean and what they can do, let's take a look at whose hands are we in? As we approach Good Friday, we remember the last words of Jesus on the cross: 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23:46). The hands of God suggest the idea of perfect safety. Jesus knew the hands of men to be cruel and wicked. Jesus said: 'The Son of Man shall be betrayed into the hands of men and they shall kill him' and 'Behold, the hand of him that betrays me is with me on the table'.

There is a well-worn story about a man who was walking along a narrow path, not paying much attention to where he was going and slipped over the edge of a cliff. As he fell, he grabbed a branch growing from the side of the cliff. Realising that he couldn't hang on for long, he called out for help. He yelled, 'Is there anybody up there?' When a voice answered, the man said, 'Who's that?' The voice replied, 'It's God, do you trust me?' The man said, 'I trust you completely, Lord.' God replied, 'Good. Let go of the branch.' After a long pause the man cried out, 'Is there anybody else up there?'

When Jesus cried out 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' in that moment he made the final commitment to co-operate with what it would take for the plan of salvation to be fulfilled, that the fullness of re-creation might take place, that light would shine through the darkness, and that ultimately all things would be made new. And if our desire is to fully co-operate with the outworking of God's purposes in and through our lives, then these words can be powerful, if not pivotal, words for us to say, even in the face of our greatest darkness.

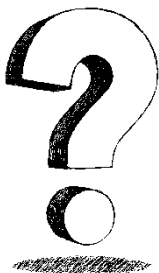
We need to remember that being Christians or trusting in our Lord does not insulate us from troubles or trials or problems or issues. There may be times when we are overlooked, forgotten, ignored, insulted, but there is promise behind all of that trouble and tribulation. There is a higher purpose

behind all that. We need to believe in what Romans 8:28 tells us: 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose'. So, the question is, are we ready to surrender ourselves into his hands?

Sadly, there are many things that prevent us from surrendering ourselves like Jesus did. There is the 'I' factor: most of you know this. I think most sin comes from the route of selfishness. Adam and Eve started this in the garden of Eden in the beginning, continued by Cain, and we see numerous examples in the scriptures, where this has overtaken the will of God and destroyed lives and nations.

Also, there is the feeling of unworthiness: this is a common feeling – that we are unworthy of being cared for by God, the feeling that we might already be so deep in sin that God might not want us or forgive us. There can be no feeling further from the truth. God does not look at our past. God does not remember our mistakes. God says: 'I will cast your sins in the depth of the ocean, and I will remember no more.'

Psalm 118 has to be one of the most 'Christian' psalms in the Old Testament. Jesus used verse 22 in the Parable of the Vineyard (Matthew 21:42), Peter used it to defend the apostles' work before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:11 and used it to speak of the church in 1 Peter 2:4-10. For Jesus and the apostles, it was the Pharisees who rejected the 'stone'. Yet it was the Lord's doing to lift up what the world rejected for his glory. The world rejected Jesus by crucifying him and leaving him in that tomb. God made him the cornerstone by lifting him up to build his church. 'This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it' (Psalm 118:24). So, shall we commit ourselves into the hands of God, which is so central to the scripture? Remember the central verse of the Bible, Psalm 118:15? You know that it talks about the hand of God. Not surprisingly, the very next verses talk about what happens when God's right hand does things: 'The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things! I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done' (v16,17).



Questions:

Consider God's word:

1. How about us – whose hands do we commit ourselves into?
2. Are we inclined to trust the human hands more?
3. Whom do we turn to in times of trouble?
4. Do we turn to human wisdom?
5. Or do we really understand the might of the arms of God and surrender ourselves to him?



Pray together:

Though we have known hardship and pain,
though life has not always turned out as we had hoped,
we will stand here and say:

God's steadfast love endures for ever!

Though life becomes more complex,
the deepest questions remain unanswered,
and the mystery of faith deepens, we will say:

God's steadfast love endures for ever!

And though the pain of the world
often seems more than we can bear or address,
we will stand firm in our faith and say:

God's steadfast love endures for ever!

Amen.