

Sermon

Epiphany 1 Year A—January 12, 2020

Saint Mark's Episcopal Church Charleston, SC

The Reverend Dr. Philip C. Linder

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it; I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you...(Isaiah 42) The prophet Isaiah proclaimed that we do not choose God—God chooses us. God takes us by the hand and keeps us. It is because of God that you are here in church this morning. It is because of God that I have been an Episcopal priest for 34-years. God chooses us to be in relationship. Would we ever in goodness enter a relationship with the intention of destroying it? Would God ever enter a

relationship with the purpose of one day destroying it? Would the God of the Incarnation and Epiphany ever do such a thing?

This of course is a very difficult question that in one form or another, we all face at one or more points in our lives. Perhaps that question arises because of a personal tragedy or an extremely hard experience. Or, maybe it is our witness to events in our nation and world that suddenly causes us to feel that God has left the room: the 2015 massacre at Mother Emmanuel Church here in Charleston, that awful mass shooting in 2017 at a Las Vegas concert, or this past week's downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet killing all 176 passengers from the nations of Iran, Canada, Ukraine, Sweden, Germany, Afghanistan, as well as Great Britain. Where then is the God that Isaiah proclaims—or the Jesus that was baptized by John in the river Jordan?

British poet and academic Minnie Louise Haskins wrote: *And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.' And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than the known way.'*

Events of your life and events of the world can be quite difficult and painful to grasp at times, yet the hope of a life-giving God with an outstretched hand continues. And this was the hope that entered the world through the birth of Jesus Christ, was visited by the Magi, and was further proclaimed when God called down from heaven at Christ's baptism, *This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3)* And it is the same hope that we celebrate today in two thousand and twenty.

When you have had loss or tragedy in your life, have you experienced what Isaiah meant by God taking you by the hand? The answer is not always a simple one—sometimes we feel God's presence, and at other times we may experience isolation and the apparent absence of God. Those are the times when a kind word, a pat on the back, or a quote from scripture simply doesn't cut it. Instead we need to feel the squeeze of God's hand. All God asks of us is that we hold out our open hand in that darkness, the rest we must leave for God.

Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu in his book, "God Has a Dream," writes: *If you were in heaven now you would notice the tears in God's eyes. The tears streaming down God's face as God*

looked on us and saw the awful things that we, God's children, are doing to each other. God cries and cries. And then you might see the smile that is breaking over God's face like sunshine through the rain, almost like a rainbow. You would see God smiling because God was looking on you and noting how deeply concerned you are. (P127-128)

Can you see how God has taken you and the world by the hand in these events? Can you see how God is always working to alleviate the great pain and suffering? I believe that we have witnessed this over and over again. You see, God never does end our relationship and leave us. The God that Isaiah proclaimed is the same God that called down from heaven at his Son's baptism. It is the same God that has been with us since our Baptism. And, it is the same God that in times of personal and world tragedy asks us only to reach out for God's hand, even when we cannot feel his grasp and presence. God is always, always with us, because we like Jesus are the beloved sons and daughters of God. **+AMEN.**