

Text: John 10: 22-30
Title: The Palm of Your Hands
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A philosophy professor went for a walk with his son – who was studying for his bar mitzvah. The father expected a conversation about the traditions, the faith, and the impending party, but instead his 13-year-old son announced that he didn't believe in God.

The father asked how he came to this decision, and the boy responded, "If God was real, he wouldn't let all those people die."

The boy's answer was against the backdrop of a pandemic that's credited with one million deaths in the United States and the slaughter of civilians in Ukraine. The boy went on, "God is supposed to care about us, that doesn't seem like something you'd let happen, if you cared – you'd stop it."

The professor-father tells of this exchange in writing about the variety of "proofs" for the existence of God, but the boy's question has a timeless human quality....

If God is real wouldn't God put an end to human suffering? If God is all powerful and all loving, wouldn't God intervene when cancer invades, war breaks out, Alzheimer's breaks through, sexual abuse happens, or there's another senseless shooting? If God is real, why is life so often chaotic and cruel?

Is God real? It's an ancient question, and it's not far from what's asked of Jesus in our text. Consider....

Jesus was walking in winter on the porch of Solomon's temple. He may have been simply staying out of the cold. The colonnade faced the east and there were massive protective walls to the west – sometimes teachers walked as they taught to stay warm. But it was also the setting where kings would hand down judgments about issues of justice. Think of it as the steps of the Supreme Court building.

Jesus was walking in winter on the porch of Solomon's temple during Hanukkah – the festival celebrating the rededication of the temple – when fellow Jews stopped him in his tracks, encircled him and asked if he was the Messiah. On the steps of the temple, they wanted an answer: "Put up or shut up. Will justice come from your hand? Are you the Messiah? Are you real?"

The Gospel of John includes seven "I am" statements:

I am the bread of life...
I am the vine; you are the branches...
I am the resurrection and the life...
Etcetera....

This would seem like the perfect opportunity to proclaim number eight: I am the Messiah. But...

But Jesus doesn't speak that word or claim that title. Rather, he says, in effect, "Look, I've been telling you who I am. Everything that I've been doing is a window into who God is and who I am. My followers know this. They know me. I know them. They follow me...."

It's a coy-little-side-step. Jesus doesn't say that he is the Messiah, but he doesn't say that he isn't. He says that having to ask is evidence that you haven't been paying attention or that you just don't get it. And, truth be told, that's not much of an answer for one wondering about the existence of God.

But then he says this. Translated here by a New Testament Greek scholar:

I am giving them, in turn: deep, lasting Life, and they will never perish, and no one will ever snatch these people out of my grip. The people my Father gave me are greater than all other things (on earth) and no one will ever snatch that people out of my Father's grip.

Three times, buried in those few lines, Jesus says that his followers will never slip from the security of his grip. He has hold of them. God has hold of them. So, in response to being asked "Are you the Messiah? Are you real?" Jesus says that the people God has given him are ultimately and eternally secure in him.

Dear friends, you are ultimately and eternally secure in God.

The Reformed tradition calls this the "perseverance (or preservation) of the saints." To paraphrase article 8 of the 5th Main Point of Doctrine in the 404-year-old Canons of Dort:

If it were up to us: if it were up to our merits, our strength, our faith, and our grip, we would fall away. But it is not up to us, it is up to God, and God's counsel can't be changed, God's promises can't fail, God's purposes can't be revoked, God's work can't be rendered ineffectual, God's grip can't be loosed.

When corralled on the Solomon's porch and asked about being the Messiah, Jesus said he'd never lose his people. It's an odd and obtuse answer. It's not what they expected or wanted to hear. In fact, when he followed it up by saying that he and God were one, they pick-up stones to kill him.

Canadian singer-songwriter Kathleen Edwards, while going through a divorce from her guitar-player-husband, wrote a song with this refrain:

I am looking for a soft place to land, the forest floor, the palm of your hands....

It is a haunting beautiful line.

When everything is falling apart,
when evil has broken through,
when we feel lost,
we want the security of the earth beneath our feet
and to be gently and unfailingly held in the palm of God's hands.

Kathleen Edwards taps into the deep human longing for something unshakable and unassailable – God. Something that will prevail against all the hell that this world can throw our way – God. A soft place to land – God.

Jesus doesn't really give an answer here about the existence of God in light of the problem of suffering. He doesn't explain or excuse or exclude the terrors of this world.

Rightly we ask the questions.

Rightly we shake our fist and cry out, "why?"

Rightly we're angry.

And, quite frankly, evidence for the existence of God doesn't mean an explanation for the pain and suffering in this world. To credit God's existence to a plan or purpose for humanity's ills is to run roughshod over the reality of human suffering.

The philosopher-father and his son land on living "as if" God exists. As the boy says, "I think that the for real God is pretend and the pretend God is for real." He clarifies, "God isn't real, but when we pretend, he is."

But, dear friends, the Gospel of John proclaims that

before his hands were nailed to a tree,
before his hands were cold and rigid in the grave,
before he opened his wounded-resurrected-hands to his disciples, Jesus promised that, no matter what our experience, he will never let us slip from the palm of his hands.

That's not a statement of proof but a profession faith.

That's not evidence demanding a verdict but an existential reality.

And that's more than playing pretend.....

Kathleen Dean Moore in *Great Tide Rising* writes about how life returns when areas are destroyed by things like volcanic eruptions. She recounts that, scientists have discovered pockets under rocks and in the leeward side of trees where little bits of life survives. And then from these places, called *refugia*, new life emerges, takes root, and spreads out.

I like that idea. You may have heard me speak of it before. In the face of the hard and the harsh, when we're trampled by life, when we feel destroyed there is *refugia*...

There are pockets of refuge and hope.

There is life-giving shelter.

There are places of resurrection.

Debra Rienstra puts it this way:

I know from the broad sweep of Scriptures, from history, and from my own experience that God is always at work somehow and that God loves to work in small humble hidden places. The more I think about it the more I realize that God loves refugia. The refugia model calls us to look for the seed of life where we are, concentrate on protecting and nurturing a few good things, let what is good and beautiful grow and connect and spread. Trust God's work.

Dear friends, you are ultimately and eternally secure in God.

What we long for are tangible expressions of that reality.

We want to know that we're in the palm of God's hand.

We want to know that God and his grip are real.

We want to know *refugia*....

I think that's a wonderful image for our calling.

May Hope be a community of *refugia* that embodies the grip of God's hand. May we be a little pocket of resurrection life that stands with and for those who are beat up and beat down. May we be defined, not by dogmatic certainty, but by a deep trust in the unshakable and unassailable grip of God.

And in that confidence, may our little corner of creation offer shelter where people can rest, grow, and flourish. May each of us be an expression of the hand of God, until that day when the very hand of God will wipe every tear from our eyes, and we will be secure in the City of God – where there will be no more brokenness, or tears, or evil, or pain, or death.

You are ultimately and eternally secure in the grip of God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.