

Second Sunday after Pentecost • May 24-25, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Isaiah 49:15b-16a

"I Will Not Forget You"

Pastor Jack Meehan

His name was Henry, but because his family was German they gave him the nickname "Heinie," short for Heinrich, the German version of Henry. He was born into a large family and raised in the rural Midwest on a farm, helping his father till the land and care for the livestock. After graduation from high school, he sensed the growing unrest in the world of his generation and enlisted in the United States Infantry in April 1941 and received his basic training. Later that same year, the United States entered into World War II, and one year after young Heinie enlisted, he left for overseas duty in April 1942. He participated in the African Campaign, approximately twenty miles from Casablanca. As U.S. ships neared the African shore, they were shelled by German planes. Barges were opened and many American troops drowned as they were trying to get to shore while being bombed from above. However, young Heinie survived and went on to serve with valor. The last letter from him was dated August 1942, and thereafter letters sent to him were censored and returned. The first official report from the War Department stated that he was killed in action somewhere in North Africa on November 8, 1942, at the age of 24 years. A memorial service was held in his hometown shortly thereafter, and when the body was returned in the spring of 1949 he was laid to rest in the local cemetery. For years to come, his aging mother and father would bring flowers to his grave each Saturday. They did not forget. How could they forget? Corporal Henry "Heinie" Ohlendorf was my mother's brother, my uncle, and though I did not know him, he has not been forgotten. This weekend, as our nation observes Memorial Day, we remember those who have given the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for the liberty which we so often take for granted. Freedom is not free; it comes at a price. And so we remember.

The truth is that we have a tendency to forget. Our memory is very short. The Word of the Lord from his servant Isaiah tells us this: **"But Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me.' Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even they may forget, yet I will not forget you. See, I have inscribed you on the palms of my hands"** (Isaiah 49: 14-16a). In times of trouble we find ourselves crying out, even as God's people of old did, that the Lord has forsaken us and has forgotten us. Have you ever felt this way? If so, you are not alone. You stand in a long line of people, including many people from holy Scripture, who have felt this way. When life seems to be one problem after another, when all things seem against us to drive us to despair, we may feel that even God himself has abandoned and forgotten about us. In such times, let us turn to this passage from Isaiah and hear what the Lord himself tells us. Our faith is more than our feelings! Our feelings and emotions, important as they are, are not always an accurate barometer of how God feels toward us. Rather than rely on fleeting emotions which may or may not be correct, let us hear God's own word about his feeling toward us. And when we feel broken, helpless, and forgotten, that word is a word of promise and comfort. God has not forgotten his beloved children who are so dearly loved that God did not spare the life of his only Son, but offered him up on the cross as payment for all our sins. How could such a God forget?

Despite the fact that God remembers us, we don't always remember God. As I stated already: we have a tendency to forget about many things, including God. When we do forget about God's loving promise to be with us in adversity, we are prone to do those things which Jesus speaks of

in today's Gospel lesson (Matthew 6:24-34): worry about life, worry about what we will eat and drink and wear. Listen to what the Lord Jesus tells us: "**And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?... So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today**" (Matthew 6:27, 34). We've all got things we could be worrying about; things that could keep us awake all night long and rob us of the joy God would have for us in life. But if God, the Maker of heaven and earth, tells us that we are inscribed on the palms of his hands, doesn't that lighten the load? If God so loves us that he can never forget us, doesn't that help us to go of the worry? God invites us to turn our worries and burdens over to him. If we're going to serve a master, and as Jesus tells us, we can't serve two masters, wouldn't we want to serve the master who never forgets us and how loves us beyond imagination?

Next Saturday, I will be leaving for Iowa to visit my mother who is recovering from surgery, and has been hospitalized several times over the last three weeks. At this point, her mind is very good, but the day may come, as it does for many, when dementia and memory loss set in. A good number of you are caring for aging parents and family members who suffer with this. The story is told of an elderly woman who struggled with these things. When her son came to visit her, she reached the point where she could no longer remember his name. One particular day, when she really couldn't recall very much at all, she sighed deeply and pointed to the cross on her wall, and said to her son: "I may forget your name, but he never forgets your name. He never forgets my name, either." Friends in Christ, that is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: he never forgets who we are. He never forgets our name. We are inscribed on the palms of his nail-pierced hands. Amen.