

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-7

Text: Isaiah 42:6; Isaiah 41:13

Message: The Touch of Peace

March 15, 2020; Bethel CRC, Brockville, ON

Lent 3

Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

There is a lot of uncertainty and fear in our world right now, with the spread of this novel coronavirus, COVID-19. There are no handshakes, no hugs, no touching. We are expected to keep a social distance. It makes us realize how much touch is something that we long for. We know that in these times of increased social media, face-to-face contact and touch has decreased. But we also know how important it is.

With the spreading of this new virus we find ourselves living in a world of fear and suspicion. Hoarding is happening in ways we didn't expect. When we are being told to stay away and keep distant and behave in the unnatural ways, we begin to think more about what is our comfort and our hope.

The picture in Isaiah 42 is a wonderful image of a caring God giving support and encouragement to the people he loves. This chapter speaks of an individual, "my servant." These verses are often called a Servant Song, referring to Jesus and his ministry of humble caring. These verses can also be understood to address those who believe in Jesus and follow him in humble service. Filled with the Spirit, the followers of Jesus continue his ministry.

In the picture given in these verses, there is no insult, or taking advantage of anyone. It's a picture of God giving strength to those who feel overwhelmed.

In the earlier verses of Isaiah 42, there is reference to a bruised reed. As a hollow reed, it is fragile. It has been weakened, perhaps pinched at some place along the stem. But it is not cracked or broken. Life-giving nourishment can still flow through the stem, but it is hindered by the bruise.

Our gracious, almighty God does not throw away something that is damaged. He doesn't reject those who are imperfect, struggling, doubting, hurting. He reaches out with a gentle hand to lift and hold and strengthen.

A smoldering wick he will not snuff out. When you blow out a candle, it is easy to think that when the flame is gone, the candle is out. But as long as some smoke smolders from it, there is a tiny bit of ember still on the wick. It can be easily re-lit, when a bit of heat is applied to the ember.

A smoldering wick does not give off much light or heat. It just looks like a puff of smoke. But there is still life and hope and possibility. Our gracious God does not reject those who are imperfect, struggling, doubting, hurting. He reaches out with a gentle hand to lift and hold and strengthen. He breathes new life and light into a smoldering wick.

This gives us a picture of God's Grand Story. God does not reject or let go of his rebellious people. When we first disobeyed, he came with a promise of hope and victory. Even though God's people complained in the desert about lack of food and water, he generously brought water from a rock and sent down manna each day. When they disobeyed and worshipped other gods, he sent judges and prophets to point out their disobedience and call them back to worship the true God. Even though God sent them into exile for 70 years, he did not forget them. He brought a remnant back to rebuild a life of worship and to live in trust.

This is God's picture in Isaiah. "I will take hold of your hand." I invite you, as you are comfortable, and with permission, to hold the hand of someone. God says, "I will take hold of your hand." Imagine God's touch of peace.

In these uncertain times, God holds our hand to walk with us as a companion along the way.

God holds our hand to lead and guide us in the direction we need to go.

In these uncertain times, God holds our hand to lift us up, to give us hope and encouragement, to give us strength as we lean on his supportive hand.

God holds our hand as a gentle reminder that we are not alone or forgotten or abandoned.

The promise of God to hold our hand is spoken along with the words, "Do not fear."

We read in the previous chapter, Isaiah 41:10, "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Isaiah 41:13, "For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you."

With God's presence we do not need to be afraid. We have God's touch of peace.

When we feel alone and scared, there is peace in feeling the hand of a friend on our shoulder.

When we feel alone and lost, there is peace in holding the hand of someone who walks with us.

When we feel alone and afraid at death's door, there is peace in holding the hand of someone we love and who cares for us.

When we feel weak and alone and afraid...there is peace in the touch of another person, reminding us we are not alone. It might not take away the pain or eliminate the reason for fear, but it does give peace and comfort to know someone is with us.

This is God's promise, the touch of peace: that we are not alone. We do not have to be afraid. God came to us in Jesus, who is called Immanuel, God with us. This is the truth of the words of Romans 8:38-39, "I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor any virus, nor any fear or doubt, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The words of Isaiah take this a step further. We not only experience the touch of peace in God's hand holding us. We also become that touch of peace in the lives of others.

Our text continues, "I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

To be a covenant is to be a sign and seal of the promises of God. The water of baptism is a sign and seal of God's promises that we are his children, loved and forgiven. The bread and cup of Communion is a sign and seal of the promises of God that we are loved and forgiven; we are God's children who receive his Spirit.

"I will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." We live and tell of God's promises of forgiveness of sin, of belonging to God's family, of life with God now and forever. God's people will be a light to the Gentiles, giving hope to those in darkness, speaking and living these promises. It's not *our* light that shines hope and peace into the lives of others. It is God's light shining through us. "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14-16).

The touch of peace. "I will take hold of your hand." As we know that touch of peace of God's presence in our lives, we share that peace with those around us. Be the presence of God in the life of another as you take hold of their hand, whether literally or figuratively.

Speak words of *your* comfort and hope, the trust that lives in your heart, as an expression of care and support for others. It's not about telling people "everything's OK." Things are not OK. It's a mess. It's an uncertain mess.

But in this mess we trust in God to be with us and to care for us.

Be a listening ear, not trying to solve someone's problem, but sharing and letting someone know that they are not alone and do not have to be afraid.

The touch of peace. "I will take hold of your hand," says the LORD God. Jesus has come that we may know God's touch of peace.

In the name of Jesus, reach out to others with God's touch of peace.

Amen.