

I

As some of you know, I was raised as an only child, so my entire childhood, it was just the three of us. My dad likes to tell people that they asked God for lots of little ones, but instead God gave them one great big one.

And then, one steamy August afternoon, after helping me load all my worldly possessions into my freshman dorm room, mom and dad hugged my neck, got in their car, and started the long drive home.

I busied myself with unpacking and settling in. But at some point late that afternoon, it suddenly it hit me like a sucker punch right to the guts. This wasn't camp, and they weren't coming back on Saturday afternoon to pick me up. That day marked a hinge point in our relationship – a marker between what had been and what would be.

Not too long ago, I experienced that feeling again – this time as a parent. I stood in the driveway and watched our two oldest boys ride their scooters beyond my field of view and the sound of my voice. Their crash helmets were secure upon their heads, and I knew that they were only going a few blocks and would return very shortly.

But as I watched them disappear from view, and I was surprised by that sudden sucker punch in the guts. I know that being a good parent means working yourself out of a job and sending independent, kind, brave

children into the world, but that pain did not go away until they came riding back into view, grinning from ear to ear and full of joy with their newfound independence.

Amy and I know there will be other rites of passage are ahead. Before long, we'll have three teenage boys learning to drive, so we've already started saving for insurance premium hikes to come.

II

That's an odd feeling, isn't it? Maybe for you it's more like a lump in the throat, or a tingle in the spine. But we've all experienced that feeling that we're at a hinge point in a relationship – a point that defines what once was and what will now be.

And when that feeling comes, it reminds us that there's a truth about this life that we don't like to think about too often – there's not a single hand that we will hold that someday we won't be forced to let go permanently. We let go of hands at the end of the driveway or at the threshold of the dorm room or on the day he or she left for the deployment, or any number of partings, but we also are cognitively aware that someday we will be forced to let go of hands at the bedside and the graveside. Every hand that we will hold in this life we one day be forced to release.

-- Except for one...

III

Our text this morning comes to us from Psalm 139. It's been said that the psalms were the prayer book and the hymnal of ancient Israel, and the authorship of this particular prayer is attributed to King David.

David is remembered as the greatest king to rule over ancient Israel. It was under David's leadership that the Israelites transformed from a loose confederation of tribes into a unified, independent nation. It was David that established the city of Jerusalem as the ancient Israel's political, military, and religious capital. It was said that David was a man after God's own heart.

At the same time, David was a sinner, the same as you and me. The Scriptures pull no punches about David's many moral failures. Just like you and me, David was capable of great feats of faith and righteousness, while also capable of sorrowful sin and destruction. He's an altogether human figure.

Many of the 150 psalms in our bibles are attributed to King David, but I like to think that David wrote Psalm 139 late in life. Perhaps he knows that his time on earth was growing short, and like a man suddenly conscious of his advancing years, he reflects back on the course of his life.

And as David thinks about all the ups and downs of his life, he comes to a sudden, startling realization. There has never been a time, not one single second of his life, when God was not with him. That's not to say there haven't been

times when it has been difficult for David to feel God's presence. And that's not to say that there haven't been times when David hasn't tried to run and hide from the presence of God. But David suddenly realizes that there has never been a time when God has not been with him.

*Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I
make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If
I take the wings of the morning and
settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and
your right hand shall hold me fast.*

Then David begins to realize that before he was even twinkle in his mother's eye, God has known him.

*For it was you who formed my
inward parts; you knit me together in
my mother's womb. My frame was not
hidden from you when I was being
made in secret, intricately woven in the
depths of the earth.*

And then it simply becomes too much for David.

*How weighty to me are your
thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum
of them! I try to count them – they are
more than the sand. I come to the end –
I am still with you.*

IV

I come to the end – I am still with you.

My sister, before you were a twinkle in your mother's eye, God was

there. My brother, on the day you took your first breath, God was there. And God has been there for every single moment of your life.

On the days of great joy, God was there. On the days when you have been a model of righteousness and faithfulness, God was there. And on those days when your sin has caused you to stumble, on those days when you have fallen short of God's glory, on those days when you have tried to run and hide from God, God was there. There is nowhere on the earth, or above it or beneath it, that you can be apart from the presence of God.

And on those days when you have been required to release the hand of someone you have loved – whether at the end of the driveway, at the doorway of the dorm room, at the bedside or at the graveside – as you released that hand, God was holding your other one.

Some day, you will exhale your last breath. Some day, you will die, and on that day, you will release the hands of those who have accompanied you on the last mile of your earthly journey.

But you will never, ever, be released by the hand of the God who loves you so much that he's willing to become human for you, willing to go to the cross for you, willing to be raised from the grave for you, willing to pray for you.

One day you will come to the end – and because the promises of Scripture are trustworthy and true, you will

discover that even then, God is still with you.

V

If you've been worshiping with us for the last few weeks, you may recall that two weeks ago, we read the story of the Ascension – the events recounted in the gospels and in the Book of Acts when 40 days after his resurrection, Jesus bodily ascended into heaven.

Then last week, we read the story of Pentecost, the day when the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem and suddenly the Holy Spirit descended on them and they were suddenly able to speak all the languages of the known world.

Sometimes we read those stories and the creeds of the church in such a way that it seems like Jesus has left the building. Sometimes we read those stories and the creeds in such a way that it seems like Jesus has dropped us off, wished us good luck, told us to use our best judgment, and then turned around headed home, and now it's up to us to figure out the rest on our own.

But that's not the truth that Scripture proclaims. The very last words of the gospel according to Matthew are "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I am with you *always*.

There's not a single hand that we won't someday be required to release – except for his. As our ancestors in the Christian faith confessed in the

Heidelberg Catechism, we belong, body and soul, in life and in death, not to ourselves, but to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

In the waters of baptism, Jesus is with us.

In the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the cup, Jesus is with us.

In the reading and proclamation of the Word, Jesus is with us.

When we welcome the stranger,
when we shelter the vulnerable,
when we visit the sick and imprisoned,

when we insist upon truth and justice from those in positions of power,

when we stand in solidarity with the poor and oppressed,

when we offer so much as a cold drink of water to one who is thirsty,

Jesus is with us.

His name is Emmanuel – which means, God-with-us.

And if the Triune God is for us, who can stand against us? If the Triune God is with us, then though the seas should roar, and the earth should quake, and the mountains should tumble to the sea – we shall not fear.

I come to the end – I am still with you.

I am with you *always*, to the end of the age.

Thanks be to God! Amen.