

Sermon (Isaiah 63: 7-9):

During a recent interview, President Obama reflected on his time in office as his tenure winds down to its final days. One of the last things the interviewer asked about was the letters the President has received. What are people saying? What concerns them? What are their hopes?

During the course of his Presidency, at his request, President Obama has received ten letters a day from the letters people have sent him. These letters include not just those written by his supporters but also those from his critics. Some people, he said, tell him he's been the worst President our nation has ever had. Others, he said, have expressed their fear and concern about the future. Others have told him of their appreciation for all he has tried to do and the dignity with which he has tried to serve.

The interviewer then expressed surprise when President Obama said he responds to as many of these letters as he is able.

Imagine what it would be like to receive a personal letter like that from the President. Not a form letter, not a letter written by his P.R. department, but a letter in direct response to the one sent by us. It's not something any of us would expect given the many other weighty items a President must deal with on a daily basis.

When the then outgoing President George H.W. Bush left office, he left a hand written note on the desk in the Oval Office for the newly elected President Clinton. In it he wrote, 'You will be our President when you read this note. I wish you well. I wish your family well. Your success is now our country's success. I am rooting for you.'

I think you would agree that a personal note like that gives great insight into the character of the person who wrote it and, given how President Clinton has kept it all these years, it obviously

meant a great deal to him. There's nothing quite like the personal touch.

I heard this past Monday was national 'Thank you' note day. (Bet you didn't know there was such a day! Neither did I.) I worked on a few notes myself. A recent survey confirms that, even today, a majority of folks still love getting hand written 'Thank you' notes over emails and texts. Unfortunately, I am not as good at this as I wish I was but there are numerous folks in this congregation who are. I have been the recipient of some of these notes and they always mean a great deal to me. Some of them end up in my 'Keeper' basket for later re-reading when I am feeling down.

Isaiah writes to the people of Israel, 'It was no messenger or angel but God's own presence that saved them; in God's love and pity God redeemed them, he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.'

No messenger, no angel, no stand-in, no form letter - God's very own presence. It's something I often pray for when I am unsure what to ask of God, especially when I am at the side of someone who is very ill and clearly suffering. I ask God to make God's presence known to them, to help them feel and sense that God is near. Sometimes only the personal will do even when it comes to God. No messenger, no angel, no stand in will suffice.

In these words from Isaiah we not only hear of God's presence but also God's activity among his people, 'he redeemed them, he picked them up and carried them all the days of old.'

These words we just read from Isaiah are a small oasis in the midst of some pretty angry and upsetting words behind it and before it. As we have seen at other times in God's journey with his people, God's fury and wrath are in full force. In some ways, we

even sense that God has set himself up for disappointment.

‘Surely they are my people,’ God said in this passage, ‘Children who will not deal falsely.’ Has God forgotten that whole journey he made from Egypt to the Promised Land with these often ornery people? Is it possible that God is suffering from Dementia?

‘Children who will not deal falsely...’ It’s enough to make us cringe because we know all too well that what will come next is a severe let down.

‘You’re expecting too much from us, God! Give us a minute, maybe two, and we’ll show you just how wrong you are.’

Some have suggested that these verses we just read from Isaiah function a bit like what Moses did when he stood between an angry God and a rebellious people.

‘Remember, God, remember how you loved them. Remember the covenant you made with them.’

‘Remember, People of God, remember how God has loved you, redeemed you, saved you, even carried you like a parent who lovingly carries their child even when their back hurts and their heart is breaking.’

Remembering has always been such an important component of faith keeping. Our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate numerous festivals throughout the year to help them remember and relive the stories of their faith. Our Christian Calendar is set up to repeat, every year, the story of Jesus from his birth to his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension so that we might ground our lives in it and not forget who we really are in the messiness of daily living. Jesus is the personal touch that God sends to us...not an angel, not a messenger, not a stand-in, not a representative but God-with-us. For God, it’s all personal.

Today is the first day of a new year. It’s a time when it’s

customary for us to pause and reflect on where we have been and where we are going. It's a good practice. I say that because I think there are times when we can *only* see God's personal touch in our lives by way of hindsight.

It's even what the opening lines of our text from Isaiah invites us to do. 'I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord...' Such a statement is made with the assumption that God's gracious deeds and personal touch are there, just waiting to be noticed through the act of 'recounting'.

Life is hard, sometimes very hard and very painful. Even so, God is never shy about wading into the deep waters with us. Over and over again, God gets personal, sometimes wrangling good from the deepest tragedy; sometimes guiding our steps to places we are hesitant to go; sometimes drying our tears by way of his own touch. God gets personal...loving us despite the mess we are, lifting us up when our hands reach for him, carrying us as a parent carries a child.

Remembering is such a critical component of the faith story. Remembering the stories of our faith so that we, in turn, can recognize God's personal touch in the recounting of our own days.

Remembering, it seems, is even a critical component of who God is. We don't make it easy for God yet in God's remembering God always seems to return to the place a good parent always does, 'When all is said and done, this *is* my beloved child.'

Such remembering, I think, has a way of preparing us for the road ahead. The God who has walked the path behind us is the same God who promises to remain with us in the days to come. It's the very last thing Jesus promised before his ascension, 'And remember,' he said. (See there's that remembering thing again!) 'And remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'

Not an angel, not a messenger but God's very own self. For God, it's always personal.

I don't know about you, but I find this a very hard memory to keep at the forefront of my thoughts. No matter how disciplined I try to be, I seem to easily fall prey to thinking that I'm on my own, it's up to me, my thoughts are the only right thoughts, my perspective is the only true perspective, my reasons are the best reasons. Perhaps my primary resolution this year needs to be that I will listen more and pay attention more to the one who has been with me in the past and who promises to be with me in the days ahead.

Perhaps this is especially true for this year because, in all honesty, I enter this year with many deep concerns about what is to come. And, given my easy proclivity to forget the one who is with me, I pray that I will work hard to listen more carefully.

I pray that, when needed, this personal God will challenge my self-inflated biases and narrow preconceptions when need be and I will be wise enough to listen and pliable enough to change.

At the same time, I pray that I will be gifted with the courage to speak and act when this very personal God challenges me to do so. I know it will not be easy, probably even scary, but, if and when the time comes, may God help me to feel his presence in such a way that I can boldly do that which I can't possibly do on my own.

Perhaps, this is the best kind of New Year's resolution any of us could make.

To God alone be all the glory. Amen.