

“The Hands of God”

Isaiah 66:10-14

Psalm 115:1-8

On our way to Iowa to visit Danette’s family, we stopped for an overnight in South Bend, Indiana, right along I-80, only about 4 hours from here. We found our way to the campus of Notre Dame University to experience what I’ve been told is one of the most beautiful churches in America.

We arrived on the campus at about 4:30, found a parking spot across from the bookstore and started walking toward the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. The walking was slow because many different colored tulips were blooming requiring pictures. The campus is manicured almost to perfection.

As we approached the massive wooden doors to the Basilica, I noticed students hurrying in. Then the 23 bells in the bell tower with a 12-foot golden cross on top began to ring out. I realized we were just in time for 5:00 mass. When we walked in, and I looked up there was gold everywhere. Paintings of angels on the ceiling, beautiful stained-glass windows portraying the church fathers of old along both sides, and then the altar with Jesus and disciples painted on the wall behind it.

We then looked down to try to find a pew. They were filled on both sides with college students on Monday at 5:00! I spotted one other gray-haired old man, the only person wearing a mask, in a pew towards the back. Danette and I sat down in the pew behind him. Worship began shortly when two younger priests and some female assistants entered from a hidden door beside the altar.

No screens with words on it, no bulletin, no hymnals opened. The priest asked everyone to join him as we do at the beginning of worship, with confession. It was a loud, earnest, memorized confession. Young voices were raised in unison. Stressed voices as we later learned it was finals week.

One of the assistants read the lessons, the younger priest the gospel with the same responses we use. The other priest gave what I would call a short devotion honoring St. Athanasius of Alexandria who died on that date in 373 A.D., best known for the Athanasian Creed.

The priest pointed out which one he was on the stained-glass window next to where we were sitting. Then the bread and wine was brought to the altar, and he prepared to bless it with very similar words that we use. Danette and I remembered to stop praying the Lord's Prayer early. No "for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever".

We pretty much fit right in except for our age. We both happened to be wearing green that day. Danette was wearing a green sweatshirt and I was wearing a green shirt and green pants amongst a sea of green Notre Dame sweatshirts.

There was no singing either by the priest or the congregation. After Holy Communion there were prayers and a blessing. Several of the girls held hands during the prayers. There was a lot of kneeling throughout the service, up and down, much more physically challenging for us but not a problem for the students!

After the service we made 3 more stops. We went down the hill to the Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, a one-seventh replica of the French shrine. Students were there for quiet reflection and prayer.

Then we walked over to the 14-story library which has a 14-story fresco on the front formally known as the “Word of Life”. The students call it “Touchdown Jesus”.

Next to the library is a huge statue of Moses with his foot crushing the golden calf that his people had forged while he was on Mt. Sinai receiving the 10 Commandments on tablets that he’s protecting with one arm wrapped around them. As he points one finger to the sky, the students call him, “First Down Moses”.

Walking the Notre Dame Campus was quite an experience!

With all the artistic portrayals of God, Jesus, Moses, the church fathers and saints, I thought of our 1965 portrayal of God’s hand holding baby Jesus as the Holy Spirit descends into our world.

In our O.T., text from Isaiah, he is rejoicing as God’s people return from exile. Now God will bless them with prosperity and wealth. God’s hands will hold them as a mother holds her baby while nursing and carries her child on her lap. Then in verse 14; “It shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants”.

Throughout the O.T., the hand of God is presented as a powerful part of God’s anatomy, manifesting his intervention in the human world long before the coming of Jesus. In the O.T., he was a hands-on God repeatedly reaching into the human realm to shape the lived experiences of his people.

Of all the parts of his body, God’s hands had been the most socially active as are our own hands. Our hands are the body parts with which each of us is most familiar; they are the features we first encounter and explore in the womb, raising them to our mouths to sense their

feel and form; throughout our lives they are parts of ourselves we see most often, most of the time.

Along with our faces, our hands are the bits of our bodies we tend to leave bare, simply because they are so very helpful to our social participation in the world. But while we make things, hold things, touch things, and take things, it is with our hands that we also grasp our sense of reality – our sense of being in the world. Our hands are not simply tools, but sensing organs.

With them we can feel shape, weight, texture, pressure, temperature, vibrations, and stillness. We can perceive comfort and pleasure, discomfort and pain. Our instinctive, habitual act of touching, feeling, and perceiving with our hands is so constant that we are often unaware of it. We don't just use our hands, we sense, see, and think with them, too; when we look at an object, we automatically anticipate touch.

As sight and hearing-impaired people know, it is with the touch of a hand, a press of a finger, that we experience the world.

Our handedness not only renders us a species of creative action-doers – but also feelers. I touch, therefore I am. The God of the Bible is no different. He touched; therefore, he was.

In 1932, a synagogue in Israel was unearthed with floor to ceiling frescos showcasing the outstretched arms and busy hands of God. The frescos show God reaching down from heaven to halt Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. His hand is stretched out to Moses standing barefoot at the burning bush. God's long, brown arms are spanning the skies over the Red Sea, one hand casting the Egyptian army into the waves, the other hand ushering the Israelites across the dried-up seabed.

On another wall, the hand of God plunged out of the skies to grasp his prophet Ezekiel by the hair and carry him off to a Babylonian valley filled with the dry bones of Jerusalem's exiles. The hand of God recreates them giving us a foretaste of God recreating us in the resurrection.

On our own reredos, the hand of God reaches down to us whenever we gather in this sanctuary, to gift us with his son, who then through his crucifixion and resurrection, gifts us with the Holy Spirit in the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion and throughout our lives together.

We, too have other gods competing for our attention and time, but they do not have the hands of God or Touchdown Jesus!

The psalmist says it well in Psalm 115:1-8 . . . ¹Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness. ²Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" ³Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases. ⁴Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. ⁵They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. ⁶They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. ⁷They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; they make no sound in their throats. ⁸Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them.

May the peace of God . . .

#889 – The Right Hand of God (verses 1-4)