**Isaiah 41:9-13** May 23, 2021

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*Isaiah 41:9I took you from the ends of the earth,  
from its farthest corners I called you.*

*I said, ‘You are my servant’;  
I have chosen you and have not rejected you.*

***10So 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.***

*11All who rage against you   
will surely be ashamed and disgraced;*

*those who oppose you   
will be as nothing and perish.*

*12Though you search for your enemies,   
you will not find them.*

*Those who wage war against you   
will be as nothing at all.*

*13For I am the Lord, your God,   
who takes hold of your right hand*

*and says to you, Do not fear;  
I will help you.*

*(The* ***bolded*** *words are Allison Johnson’s confirmation verse.)*

Dear Friends In God Our Savior,

It starts very young—hand-holding. I’m not talking about 15-year-olds. Hand-holding starts long before that.

When you have that newborn baby in your arms and you look at her so cute, you want to hold that little hand. Problem is her hand is so tiny that she can’t possibly hold your hand, so you take a finger, gently pry open her tiny fist, and then you let her whole hand grip your one finger. You love the feel of that tender, warm, little hand.

And you don’t stop holding hands. You hold the child’s hand often as she grows: while learning to walk or adventuring into the unknown. Eventually she doesn’t want to hold your hand. “That’s for babies!” she protests. “I’m a big girl!” Yes, after all she is five years old! But maybe sometime, in a moment of fear a couple years after she has become a “big girl,” she accidentally reaches for your hand for security—and it pleases you immensely.

After a few more years, she will find another hand to hold. Not a parent’s hand, but the hand of a boy who turns her fancy. The first time to hold that hand is a moment of wonder. In a new and different way, this hand-holding becomes source of confidence and joy.

Which sometimes leads to the most public hand holding of all: in front of a congregation, when at the direction of the pastor she takes her beloved’s hand and speaks words of life-long commitment as she slips the ring onto the fourth finger of his left hand—what strange customs we have! *That* hand-holding isn’t a passing fancy, but a promise of commitment through all the joys and sorrows and years!

There is other hand-holding. Hand-holding often goes with sickness and sorrow, most importantly at the final sick bed, when words are no longer spoken back but life persists, holding a hand up to that last moment, right up to the final threshold.

Hand-holding is a special thing. Hand holding and hand-shaking should never be confused. Some people do. It’s happened to you. Someone shakes your hand but they won’t let go. Feeling you trying to squirm away they clamp down with the second hand. Now you’re stuck! People are staring and you try to make it plain that it’s *him,* not you. That’s not what hand-*holding* is for.

Allison, it is interesting that you chose for your confirmation verse not a verse about your commitment to God—not to say a confirmation verse like that would be a bad thing. Not at all. But you chose a verse about God’s commitment to you. Here God would have you think of what hand-holding means, and then he says, “I, your almighty God, hold your hand.”

**When God Holds Your Hand**

**I. You Remember You Are His**

**II. You Are Bold**

God holding your hand isn’t your choice. It’s God’s choice. That is an important thing to remember on this day. You are here, Allison, because God took you by the hand long long ago. When you were only a few months old, in another church, another state, with another pastor, your parents brought you forward and you were baptized. Through the water and the Word, God laid his claim on you. Yes, your parents brought you, that pastor baptized you, but it was God who made it happen because he wanted you to be his. There in your young baptism, God washed away the guilt of your sin and clothed you in the righteousness of Jesus, his blood-bought righteousness. There he took hold of you and promised to hold you in the palm of his hand for the rest of his life. At that moment, he said to you what the first verse of our reading says, ***“I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you. I said… ‘I have chosen you.’”***

Your beginnings was just like the Israelites, to whom God first spoke that passage. ***“I took you from the ends of the earth”***(9). The Israelites were not such a righteous or noteworthy people that God just had to claim them. God was very clear about that. When the Israelites first moved into their promised land God told them: *“Do not say to yourself, ‘The Lord has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.’”* (Dt 9:4) And then—you know how much you hate it when your parents say something to you, and then repeat it even though you heard them the first time—then God said it three times in five sentences: *“It is not because of your righteousness… It is not because of your righteousness…”* There was nothing wonderful about them, but there was something wonderful about God. He chose them. It had started when God called one man, Abram, out of obscurity. Abram had only one son and his family was not prolific. After 200 years they were still only a couple dozen people, but they were chosen. God continued to lead them on his chosen path. After a few more centuries they became a nation, because God was holding their hands every step of the way. They became the nation that gave birth to our Savior, Jesus.

It is just what the New Testament says about each of us and baptism. *“[God] saved us not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit”* (Titus 3:4-5)

It was just how he chose you, taking your hand. From there he guided you after your baptism. He brought you to his house to hear his word; to catechism class, whether in person or more often through online classes. He was holding your hand, guiding you.

If God has done this, if he has searched you out and chosen you from the farthest corners of the earth, you know that he will continue to be with you. He has chosen you because he wants you to be his forever. He will continue to hold your hand, speaking to you through his word. He will continue to assure you of his forgiveness and strengthen your faith through the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He who once took your tiny infant hand in baptism will continue to guide you by his hand.

**II. You Are Bold**

Which brings us to the verse you chose for this day: ***“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.”*** When you remember that it is *God* who takes you by the hand, you become bold and brave.

That’s not always easy. It wasn’t easy back then either. Israel had reason to pretty much always be afraid. Oh, sure, for a couple decades under David and Solomon, Israel was of some note. But through the centuries Israel was a small nation surrounded by superpowers. In Africa they have a proverb: “When elephants fight the grass is trampled.” Like most of their proverbs, you have to think about that for a moment. It means that the ones who suffer most when the big boys fight is not the big boys (the elephants), but the little people (the grass).

Israel had the elephant Egypt on one side. On the other side elephant changed from century to century from Assyria to Babylon and later to Persia. Israel was always being trampled by foreign powers. Read Kings and Chronicles and you will hear about it. Imagine the fear of every day waiting for the next wave of raiders to ride over the hilltop! God told his people, ***“Do not fear, for I am with you.”***

That didn’t mean that nothing bad would ever happen to them. It meant that God was with them wherever they went—or were taken. God says, ***“I am with you”*** because in some ways, just being there is the most important thing, right? For example, Whom do you appreciate more: the doctor who cures your illness, or the parent/child/spouse who is always there through all your illness and recovery? The important thing is not always that people get us out of our difficulty, but that they are willing to sit down with us and hear our worries and pains, to be there with us in our difficulty.

In the second half of your verse, he promises more, ***“I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”*** God goes beyond being there—which in some respects is the most important thing—to promising to strengthen, help and hold us by his right hand.

He lifts you eyes to a future time and promises in verse 12, ***“Though you search for your enemies, you will not find them. Those who wage war against you will be as nothing at all.”*** There will be a time beyond the present when you will physically stand with Christ. Then all the enemies and problems of this world will disappear. Even if you were to go and try to find those problems and enemies, you won’t be able to. They will have vanished with tears and pain and crying and death, *“for the old order of things [will have] passed away”* (Rev 21:4).

That’s the future. That’s the final goal. It is what gives us hope in the darkest moments, when we are most tempted to cash it all in. He will be there and he will supply what you need as you face outright enemies who make your life miserable. He will be there to strengthen you against the whispering enemies—and they are the more dangerous ones, even as Satan first attacked not by assaulting and insulting Adam and Eve, but by tempting them. God is there when you feel overwhelmed, too small to deal with what life is throwing at you, times that you will feel guilt-ridden by what you have done; times that the big questions of career, family, relationships freeze you in your place. And God reminds you, ***“I am the Lord, your God, who takes hold of your right hand”*** (13).

That’s why you are here on Confirmation Sunday. You have heard God’s promises, seen his commitment to you in your life, and now you commit yourself to him.

Remember your confirmation verse. It is not an inspirational saying. It is not a pep talk. It is God’s promise. God comes to you in your moment of need—or your moment of joy—holds your hand, and says, ***“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.”*** Thus says the Lord! Amen.