

Restoring Your Soul Through Psalms
Into Your Hands
Psalm 31: 1-8

**First Presbyterian Church
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In 1988, the TNT network created a sensation when they showed a relatively obscure movie, *A Christmas Story*, 12 times in 24 hours. Now the story of Ralphie, who wants nothing more for Christmas than a Red Rider BB gun, has become a beloved part of Christmas tradition. Over 40 million people tune in at least once each year. In one scene, Ralphie's class decides to play a little Christmas trick on their teacher. Every student wears huge, plastic teeth to class. The unflappable teacher responds by simply holding out her hand to collect the teeth. When you're a teacher or a parent, you take lots of things in hand: gum, forbidden candy, icky stuff your kids don't want. It's just part of the calling: put that right here in my hand, young man!



Keys are an important thing we place in hands. What a thrill when, on my 16th birthday, my parents placed car keys in my hands. They were going to trust me to drive their vehicles. Many of us know the thrill of having the keys to your first apartment, or house, placed in your hands. It's yours now. You've got your own place. Take care of it. Many of us know the sorrow of receiving keys in our hands. The same Dad who put keys in your hands so you could drive might one day put keys in your hands so he won't drive anymore. What goes in the hand represents trust, freedom, responsibility and commitment.



I also think about what it means when someone places a hand in another's hand. Playing backyard ball with bigger kids, I yearned to be noticed, to be accepted as worthy of being in the game. It meant everything if I got knocked down trying and then one of the older guys gave me a hand up. Totally worth any bruises. That hand meant acceptance.



I think of what it's like to feel the squeeze of a newborn hand. Wonder arises to feel the baby instinctively close around your finger. All of life before her. Life going on from one generation to the next. You'd give your life in a heartbeat for that child.



I think of how families who don't normally do a lot of hand holding clasp each other in illness. It's precious to hold the hand of a dying person, to cling to the warmth of blood still coursing, to cherish the tiniest squeeze made with the last of strength. To offer what comfort you can through giving your hand to be held.

Keep all those images in your mind as we hear David's prayer, "Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me O LORD, faithful God." Throughout his life, David had serious enemies. He took on the fierce Goliath when he was but a child. King Saul threw a spear at him, then hunted him across the country. His own son led a rebellion against him. Enemies ever tried to ensnare the king. David cried out frequently to his God. Deliver me! Hide me! Be my fortress and my refuge! In our Psalm today, we can hear David alternating in prayer. He expresses confidence and he begs for rescue. He joyfully gives thanks for all the LORD has done for him. He desperately asks God to keep it up.

Isn't this just like our lives? We look back and know that our heavenly Father has showed up for us. We stand amazed that we live and breathe, that we're still in the game. Then we look at the present circumstances and know that God really needs to show up again, right now. Because the situation is just too big for us. And then we realize that something is required of us in the moment. Trust. We remember God's faithfulness as the springboard for having faith now, when it seems like all is lost. We take the step of faith, "Into your hand I commit my spirit." I give this to you. I give *me* to you. I'm yours. Now, please, don't disappoint. Don't leave me hanging out to dry. Show up once more!

This prayer is the very basic movement of faith. Into your hands I commit my spirit. It's a much bigger step for people than we might realize. All around us people are living thinking it's all on them. There is nothing but emptiness in the vast space around our planet. There is nothing but darkness when we shoot up our thoughts into the night. People think it's all on them to make meaning out of their lives. To come up with a plausible reason to live when there is so much suffering

and cruelty and madness in the world. They try to entrust themselves to themselves. So many people have let them down that it seems the only way. It's exhausting. And lonely. And frightening.

The invitation in this psalm is to make a move out of being stuck in ourselves. To entrust ourselves to God. It's a spiritual movement. An act of faith. To take a risk that if you release your tight grip on control of your life there is Someone whose hands can receive you. It's a release into the unknown and it can feel terrifying. Into your hand I commit my spirit.

This seems like the right time to lean again on the wisdom of Tim Keller. He has frequently suggested this as the basic movement of faith: Give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of God. If you've never been connected to God, you might not know very much about him. If you've never faced the truth of yourself--the damage done to you, the damage done by you--you may not know much about what you are giving over. That's all right. The most profound move of the lonely, single soul toward the immense love of God can happen with very little head knowledge. It's simply a matter of reaching towards God and offering what you know of yourself to whatever you know of him. Into your hand, I commit my spirit. This is the step out of the dark into his marvelous light.



Here is where we recall that Jesus uttered these words from the cross. Luke's gospel records that darkness hung over the land while Jesus was crucified. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when the sun's light had failed, the great curtain in the temple ripped in two. There was no barrier between the holy place and the common place. Jesus calling out with a loud voice said, "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit." Psalm 31 was on Jesus' mind in his final moments. This psalm was deeply imbedded in his memory from years of praying it, learning it, and meditating upon it. So even though he was in great pain and under tremendous pressure, the words still came to him. "In you, my Father, I take refuge," he prayed as he hung naked and exposed on the beams. "Let me never be put to shame," Jesus prayed as he endured the most shameful death ever devised. "You have taken me out of the net they have hidden for me," he declared even as the trap the religious leaders set for him came to its deadly conclusion. The irony of praying the hope of Psalm 31 from the cross is overwhelming. No rescue was forthcoming from heaven.

So it's all the more remarkable that Jesus cried out this deep, elemental prayer of trust. He looked out at utter darkness and willed to keep believing there was light beyond. He felt only forsaken in his very soul, cut off from the Father he had loved all his days. Nevertheless. Nevertheless. By sheer determination of trust he cried out faith, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And he literally gave up his spirit, breathing his last moments later.

The very universe turned on the hinge of Jesus's words from the cross. The gospels of Matthew and Mark record that moments earlier Jesus had cried out words from Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment, Jesus had entered completely into the isolation and damnation to which all human self-centeredness leads. Christ who had ever rejoiced to feel his Father's love now felt nothing. He knew only rejection. As our Psalm declares, "I said in my alarm, 'I am cut off from your sight.'" Cursed. Condemned. The loneliest creature in all the universe, bearing the full weight of human sin. He had gone where all our hearts are ever tending, into the nothingness and horror of existence without God, without love, without hope.



But then, with only hell before him, around him, ringing despair through his mind and soul, Jesus nevertheless spoke faith. He gave his spirit into the hands of the Father he no longer felt. He submitted his will to the God who seemed to have abandoned him. It was there, right there, says Professor Torrance, that Jesus bent the human will back to God. Ever since Adam, the human will had been skewed away from obedience to rebellion. We had tended away from love towards self. Every path we took went hell-ward. In all his days among us, Jesus was living a different trajectory. He was loving his Father without reserve. He was obeying the Word of God with joy. He was a new kind of man, and he was doing all this *for us*. The supreme moment came when from the worst place he showed the most faith. On the cross, he put himself in the hands of the Father he no longer felt was there. And so, Jesus reconstructed the very existence of man. From the depths, he said Yes when ever other person had said No. He lived what we were meant to be all along.

Joined to Jesus, we discover that we now get a share in this new kind of humanity. In faith, we follow in the wake of Jesus, saying what he said, "Father, into your hands, I commit my spirit." We give as much as we know of ourselves to as much as we know of Jesus." Then, we suddenly discover all kinds of wonderful

treasure about who we are in Christ. We become part of his new, remade humanity.



In John 10, Jesus likened us to sheep of his own flock. He said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and my Father are one.” When we entrust ourselves into the hand of God, we discover that God has already placed us in his hand. No one and nothing can snatch us out of those hands. Jesus is saying, “If you can find someone bigger than my Dad, maybe he could snatch you away from me. But I’ll tell you, no one is great than my Father. You are totally safe in our hands.”

Under pressure, pursued by enemies, facing anxiety and defeat, both David and Jesus prayed, “Into your hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God...I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’” My times are in your hand.”

Once when I was very young, I was sick on a Sunday. My mother went to church and my father stayed home with me. I remember that he took me outside for a walk in the backyard. He held my hand. We saw a sunflower. Just the two of us. Decades later, I was 700 miles away when I got a call from him. He had aspirated some food. It had gone to his lungs, not his stomach. He felt fine, but they were going to take him to the hospital. Two months before he had been on a ventilator for a week after aspirating. No one thought he would survive then, but he did. In fact he relished that month of recovering. But he would not survive this. In a few hours, he would slip away. No plane or mad drive could get me there in time. It was very strange talking with him once he reached the hospital. He was very calm. I didn’t know how to tell him this was the end, or even if I should. I wanted to say something simple, something that really gets to the heart of everything. Without any adornment. “Dad, just keep putting yourself in the hands of God.” “I do,” he said, without hesitation.

That was our last conversation, and it has been an inestimable comfort to me. My Dad had come very late to faith. It was always a wonder to him that he had two sons who went to seminary. He was very literate, but not much on theology. I didn’t feel that anything more nuanced would have been right for

that moment. And I think for all of us, in the end it just comes down to this. Will you put yourself in the hands of God? Say with David, “You are my God; I trust in you. My times are in your hand.” I’m going to take a step in the dark and trust that God will catch hold of my hand and lead me to him. We’re really back to the Keller quote. Give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of God. Father, into your hands I commit my Spirit.