

The Word Endures Forever

December 7, 2008

(Advent 2 - Year B)

Isaiah 40: 1-11

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

The Prophet Isaiah cries out:

“Comfort, O comfort my people...

For the grass withers, the flowers fade,

But the word of our God will stand forever.”

The Prophet Isaiah cries out to the Hebrew people because, many years before, the Hebrew people had watched their beloved Temple in Jerusalem be destroyed.

Jerusalem had been attacked by Babylon and the Hebrew people were then exiled into Babylon, into a country far away across the desert.

Then, years later, in 539 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia defeated the Babylonians.

And Cyrus issued an “emancipation proclamation” for the Hebrew people who had been exiled in Babylon.

According to Cyrus the Great’s decree, the Hebrew people were now free to return to their homeland and to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem.

Then, onto the stage comes the Prophet Isaiah, who cries out in our scripture reading today:

“Comfort, O comfort my people.

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her [long exile] is now over!”

Then, Isaiah tries to talk the Hebrew people into coming back to Jerusalem, reminding the people about what is important in life, by proclaiming:

“The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

Jerusalem, the holy city, can wither and fade, but the word of our God

will stand forever.

The Temple can be destroyed, but the word of our God will stand forever.

For Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the only one who endures forever.

As many of you know, I have challenged this congregation to memorize a portion of the word of God.

I have challenged you to memorize the Magnificat, which is the words of Mary, the mother of Jesus, recorded in Luke's Gospel.

Mary sang these words of the Magnificat after she found out that she was pregnant by the power of Holy Spirit.

Bob Barkley, who is a member of our congregation and a member of the Vestry, told me about how the memorization of the Magnificat has affected his life, which he gave me permission to share with all of you.

Bob says that he is used to waking up in the middle of the night, worrying about all sorts of things.

However, Bob decided to use his night time insomnia to memorize the words of the Magnificat.

And, now when he wakes up in the middle of the night, Bob recites these words of Mary, this word of God,

And he now finds that these enduring words of God are a source of great comfort for him.

The Prophet Isaiah cries out to all of us:

“Comfort, O comfort my people...

For the grass withers, the flowers fade,

But the word of our God will stand forever.”

For even if the Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed,

Even if we wake up in the middle of the night worrying,

Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the only one who endures forever -

because the word of our God endures forever.

As we prepare for the celebration of this Word made flesh, also known as Christmas,

We hear messages about how we should focus more on the things that

endure, rather than the commercialization and the consumerism that goes along with this holiday.

I have heard people say that we should:

“Put Christ back in Christmas.”

Or, I have heard folks say that

“Jesus is the reason for the season.”

Therefore, in order for us to re-focus on the things that endure, I would like to issue a new challenge to all of us for the remainder of this Advent season - and for Christmas.

I would like to challenge us all to take on the practice of worship, on the 2 remaining Sundays of Advent - and on Christmas Eve.

You see, I married into a family made up of mainly Baptists and Presbyterians.

And most of the folks in Susan’s family were not used to going to church on Christmas Eve.

Yet, in my Episcopalian family of origin, we never missed being in church on Christmas Eve.

In my family growing up, we usually went to the late service on Christmas Eve, the service that is timed, just like our late service here at St. Alban’s, so that folks are receiving communion at just about midnight.

One of the years that we spent Christmas in Kentucky with Susan’s family, I looked up the service times for Christmas Eve at Grace Episcopal Church in Paducah - and we all went to church on that cold, cold night.

That year, I can still remember our family kneeling in the pews of Grace Episcopal Church.

And I can remember John, who was about 7 years old at the time, pushing my coat sleeve up, so that my watch could be visible to him.

As the priest said the words of the Eucharistic Prayer, John pushed my sleeve up to see the hands of my watch say ten ‘til midnight, then John whispered to me:

“Only 10 minutes until Christmas, Daddy.”

Then, as we said the words of the Lord’s Prayer, he pulled my arm over

so that he could see my watch:
“Only 5 minutes until Christmas.”
The usher released us from our pew, we walked up the aisle, and we
heard the words of the priest saying:
“The Body of Christ, the bread of heaven.”
John then pushed up my sleeve at the altar rail and said to me:
“Merry Christmas, Daddy.”

I doubt that either of our children can remember all the presents they
received for Christmas that year.
But, they still remember the night when we went to church on Christmas
Eve in Kentucky.
They still remember receiving the word of God, the Word made flesh,
into their hands - at the stroke of midnight.

For what endures for all of us - and for our children and grandchildren -
is not the gifts or the parties or the Christmas cards.
What endures for us is the word of our God that stands forever.
What endures for us is the comforting word of our God that we
experience in worship.

The Prophet Isaiah cries out to each of us:
“Comfort, O comfort my people...
For the grass withers, the flowers fade,
But the word of our God will stand forever.”

This Advent season, I invite you to memorize the word of God in the
Magnificat.
This Advent season, I invite you to be in church each Sunday, to
experience this word of God, which endures for ever.
This Christmas Eve, I invite you to be in worship, no matter whether you
are here at St. Alban's or whether you are out of town.

If going to church on Christmas Eve is not a part of your regular
tradition when you are out of town,
Then I invite you to get on the internet - and to find an Episcopal church
in the town where you will be this Christmas.
And then tell everyone that you celebrate Christmas with:

“This year, I want us all to go and worship the Word made flesh,
together - for the Word of God is what endures about Christmas.”

This morning, the voice of the Prophet Isaiah cries out to each one of us.
The Prophet cries out to us, with tidings of comfort and joy:

“Comfort, O comfort my people.
For the word of our God...endures forever.”

AMEN.

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