

November 14, 2004/Season after Pentecost/David L. Edwards

Keeping the Faith

Psalm 98 *...for God is coming to judge the earth. God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.*

Isaiah 65:17-25 *For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth.*

Luke 21:5-19 *By your endurance you will gain your souls.*

God announces through Isaiah the rebirth of hope and life. Here is God's dream for us and the world. God, the very Power of Life itself, is working to bring it about. A new thing. New heavens and a new earth. A transformation of humanity and the earth. It is a vision of God's kingdom, not the kingdoms that we human beings try to build out of our own devices and ideologies. Life that is abundant for all people. Not life after death, but life here and now. Long life and health for every person. People building and planting and enjoying the fruits of their labors. Women giving birth not in despair and hopelessness, but with confidence that their children will grow and thrive. All people knowing the nearness of God who responds even before we call, who answers our prayers while we are still praying. A dream of true peace, not the false peace that justifies wars and killing. Natural enemies feeding together. No one, no nation causing hurt or destruction. That's God's dream for us.

This vision of God's kingdom is either wish dreaming or it is the true nature of reality itself, the way things are meant to be. The difference is whether we who claim to be God's people live out of and toward that new heaven and earth, or deny it by the way we actually think and live. It's up to us. God has let us know the way. We can choose it or ignore it.

It is hard to hang onto this vision and let it shape how we ourselves live each day. Last Monday I was flying back to Lynchburg from Daytona Beach where Kaye and I had celebrated our 35th wedding anniversary. We had a wonderful time together. And yet there was a cloud hanging over it all. It had to do partly with the election. But that was the tip of the iceberg. Something had built up into an anxiousness and low-grade depression that accompanied me on the plane that day. The on-going slaughter in Iraq. The militant and aggressive spirit that possessed our government and society. The continuing and increasing of the suffering of so many people in our society because of poverty and lack of health care, realities not seriously addressed by either presidential

candidate. The war mentality in religion and politics alike. The rise of a religious fervor that has nothing in it of the teachings, spirit, and moral values of Jesus himself. Violence instead of nonviolence. Enemies designated and targeted instead of loved. The grasping of power instead of the powerlessness of the cross. Arrogance instead of humility.

As you can see, my spirit was sliding into a pit of despondency! As I read and meditated on the scripture readings for today, I wondered: Isaiah's vision of God's kingdom is no problem. A new heaven and earth? Health and well being for everyone? Universal peace? It is exactly that vision that has kept me a person of faith all these years. It's the only thing that makes sense to me. But I stumbled over the passage from Luke. What in the world is this about—Jesus talking about all this end-of-time stuff and his followers being arrested, abandoned, betrayed, abused, even killed? That only sounds more depressing! But as I kept listening to this passage, kept working with it each morning, slowly the good news began to appear through the fog.

This is part of Jesus' teachings on what we call the "end time." Ultimately God will bring about the kingdom. The Greek word for "end" is *telos*. But it means fulfillment or completion, not destruction and desolation. And the coming, the completion, the fulfillment of the kingdom will be in sharp contrast to the way things are now.

Somebody comments about how wonderful the temple in Jerusalem is, all those beautiful stones and ornamentations. Jesus' response throws cold water on such marveling over religious institutions and magnificent buildings. This temple that dazzles you will be destroyed stone by stone, says Jesus. Someone asks, When will this happen? Then Jesus begins talking about the so-called End Time.

He warns against getting swept up by those who claim to represent him and identify their own actions with God's coming kingdom. Don't go after them! Don't be intimidated by or enamored of those who make arrogant claims about their purposes being God's purposes. We live in a time when political and religious leaders are claiming divine authority for their actions and plans. The justice, compassion, and mercy of God are ignored in favor of a God who favors particular nations and ideological causes. The killing carried out by some in the name of their god is answered with the killing carried out in the name of our god. And when Christ is spoken of, it is without reference to his teachings, spirit, or the self-emptying power of his cross. Beware, says Jesus. Don't go after them. Don't get sucked in.

Then Jesus talks about wars and insurrections, nations rising up against nations, and natural disasters. This is where a lot of folks really get excited. Through the centuries there have always been those who see Jesus' words pointing to their own day and time. People get off on

predictions and do just what Jesus tells us consistently and clearly not to do—waste one moment of our lives trying to know what we cannot know, the times and seasons of God’s purposes.

Wars, insurrections, international conflicts. These are part of our life today just as in the past. But the thing to note is that these things have nothing to do with God’s purposes. At best, they are signs pointing to something else, something totally different from themselves, a heaven and earth that God is renewing instead of the destructiveness we are prone to carry out. These things are doomed. They have no future. They are a dead end. We are to have no part in them if we are God’s people, if we are truly followers of Jesus Christ.

This becomes clearer with Jesus’ final words in our reading. Before these things happen, something else will already be going on that does involve you, says Jesus. You are called to another kind of life. And that is what you are supposed to be about. You will come up against the powers of religion and politics. The kind of life I am calling you to will put you in conflict with the culture of violence and enmity. You will suffer as those who serve another kingdom, the kingdom that God is bringing about, the kingdom pictured in Isaiah’s words. That’s your calling. That’s your life.

What did all of this say to me on the plane that day as it touched down at the Lynchburg airport? It said something about coming home. It was good to be back home after a time away. And yet I realized that during my time away my inward journey had been pretty haphazard. I had not been able to keep my daily routine of prayer and meditation with any regularity. I needed to come back home in another way, to get back to the daily discipline of silence and inner listening. The wars and insurrections, the upheavals and violence of our national and ideological conflicts had distracted me from the truth of God’s vision. I had allowed myself to get dragged into the fray, filled with hostilities and violence in my own spirit. When we abandon the inward journey, we make ourselves vulnerable to every kind of distraction and disorientation.

Jesus calls us to a path illuminated by God’s dream for us and the world. It will bring a kind of suffering, putting us at odds with much that is going on around us. Jesus says that those who follow him will be hated because of his name. He’s not talking about our having persecution complexes. He is saying that what God is up to is at odds with the mentality of violence, selfishness, and greed that at times dominates the affairs of peoples and nations, including our own. And if we are giving our lives to following Jesus, then we’ll find ourselves alienated from the power seeking of both politics and religion.

Finally Jesus says that not a hair on our heads will be harmed. If we remain faithful to the journey, we will gain our souls, our very lives.

It is a paradox. Though we may suffer, may even be killed, says Jesus, we will not be harmed. For we are connecting our lives with what is really real, what is true and ultimately good—the new life that is called the kingdom of God.

On Tuesday, the day after I returned, I spent most of the day at the Festival Center. In the morning, a young man came by while Don and I were there. He is a troubled person. But he talked some about himself and his life, staying for quite a while before leaving. That afternoon John Withrow brought his class from Virginia University to the Center for lunch and their class meeting, introducing them to the Festival Center and its vision and mission of being a place for community, for overcoming the barriers that separate us. And late in the afternoon there came a knock at the door and in popped two of the children from our Saturday program. The father of one of them came in, too, saying that the boys wanted to come in and asking if it was okay. The boys and I sat over cookies and juice talking. They asked me about my trip and shared with me about how they were doing in school. Then I walked them home where I met the mother of the boy whose father had brought them.

Walking back up the street, I thought what a good day it had been and noticed how my spirit had become calm and peaceful, more hopeful and clear-sighted. Here had been confirmations of the vision that had led us to the corner of Fifth and Madison Streets over a year ago. The events of the day rang true. They flowed from that kingdom vision in Isaiah, the same vision to which Jesus devoted his life so completely.

Here is the reason for our being the kind of church we have tried to be through the years, a community in which each person sees himself or herself called to be an instrument of God’s vision for the life of the world. Each person accepting a lifestyle of prayer that grounds us in that vision. Each of us discovering and affirming the ways we are able, through our unique gifts and callings, to be the channels of that renewal. A community that, in the midst of all the craziness and lostness of the world that invades our own spirits, keeps coming back to that spiritual center where we are rooted and grounded in God and God’s vision for life. It is out of this disciplined life that we work with the visions and missions God gives us. Jeff’s own commitment today to Covenant Membership reminds us of this. In the midst of his own struggle with MS he has chosen to put his hope and trust in God, to keep centering his life in God.

May the God who is near to us, already answering our every prayer, fill us with a spirit of endurance, of keeping faithful to God’s vision for us and the world. A vision that will be fulfilled in God’s own time. A vision that is already present and growing in us and the world.