

“Establish Your Hearts”

In the name of him who makes the blind to see, the lame to walk, the lepers to be cleansed, the deaf to hear, and the dead to be raised to life; dear friends in Christ: As you can see from today’s Old Testament lesson, our old friend Isaiah is at it again – dangling mouthwatering carrots before our eyes. This is the third in a series of Advent readings in which we’ve heard the prophet extolling the glories of a time to come when the long promised Heir of David known as the Messiah or the Anointed One would appear, establish his throne, and from it rule over an everlasting kingdom of righteousness and peace that will include people from every race and nation on earth. In last week’s message I stressed just how desirable that would have been to Isaiah’s original audience. They were a people plagued with a long history of troublesome kings, some of which were merely mediocre or mildly incompetent and others who were altogether awful. The result was a steady decline through the centuries in Israel’s wealth, power, and prestige. The mighty nation the great David had forged and established, and which the wise Solomon had raised up to the pinnacle of earthly glory and honor had plummeted into weakness, poverty, and shame. For these fearful and disillusioned people to hear Isaiah speak of how the Lord planned to bring in a new king who would give them security and peace and raise up their fortunes to a place even higher and more glorious than ever before – and keep them there forever – why, nothing could have been more appealing.

And that was the goal: to give hope, to create a sense of deep longing – longing for the Word and Promises of the Lord to be fulfilled; for the Savior to appear and turn the wretched desert of our lives into the New Eden that Isaiah describes in such wondrous detail. The people needed that kind of hope and longing because, as the prophet also told them, things were going to get much worse before they got better. To be sure, for a time their nation would be completely wiped off the map. And then it would be occupied and controlled by a succession of foreign powers: Babylonians, Persians, then Greeks, and finally the Romans. Seven hundred dark years would pass through which the faithful few clung to the increasingly improbable promises that the Lord spoke through Isaiah and other prophets. But faith, and with it hope, comes by hearing the Word of God. And those who heard and believed what the prophets proclaimed and subsequently died in the faith have been rewarded. They lived trusting in the Christ to come and have since been received into glory. And what they trusted in was verified and confirmed when the Christ finally appeared and fulfilled everything the prophets had foretold.

What they looked forward to in hope, we now look back upon. We’ve seen how the Lord raised up his Christ from a nation and a line of kings that was considered long dead. And we see too how he has established his kingdom: not an earthly kingdom with borders and armies to defend them; but a spiritual kingdom over which Jesus rules – the Holy Christian Church – a kingdom that transcends borders and human governments, and incorporates people of every language and race. And he established this kingdom in a way no one could have imagined; not by building up a popular base of supporters or through military conquest, not even by using his divine power to crush all opposition. No, he appeared in weakness. He simply preached Words of Truth – words which in his ministry very few people believed. And then he was arrested, condemned, and crucified. It seemed all hope was lost. No one believed when they placed him in the tomb. No one had hope, because they had forgotten what he said.

But here’s an important truth: God is going to fulfill his promises whether anyone believes them or not. And so he did. Jesus was raised from the dead. He appeared to his

disciples and explained to them what had happened: how that his death on the cross was a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world, an offering to appease the wrath of God and make satisfaction for every wrong we have ever done; that whoever believes in Jesus and what he has done has the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. They have peace with God. Their spiritually blind eyes can now see. Their deaf ears can hear and understand God's Word. They walk on the Way of Holiness that Isaiah spoke of. Their lame legs, formerly unable to follow the ways of the Lord, are now marching along God's highway. They are the ransomed of the Lord coming to Zion with everlasting joy upon their heads.

Friends, that's us. It's everyone who has come to faith in Jesus in the last 2000 years and those who are yet to come to faith in him. We are in Christ's kingdom walking on the Way of Holiness. But the very idea that we're walking on a highway tells us that we haven't yet reached the goal. We're still on a journey, still waiting for promises of God to be fulfilled.

That's what James is addressing in today's Epistle lesson: our present situation, which, if you think about it, is a lot like the situation of the people Isaiah was speaking to. They were waiting for the Christ to appear the first time. We're waiting for his second coming. They waited through dark times, when it appeared to any sensible person that it was beyond impossible for the Lord to do what he had promised. And so it is with us.

What do I mean? Well, look around: there was a day when the Church and it's message of grace was respected, when it had lots of influence, when it helped shape the attitudes and morals of even those who weren't a part of it; but those days are over. Now the movers and shakers in our society have relegated the Church to the category of irrelevant at best – nothing but ancient superstitions, myths, and legends that ought to be forgotten in our modern times. Outspoken others consider the Church's morals and values to be harmful, bigoted, and repressive – things not just to be forgotten; but actively suppressed. Our scientists tell us that our faith is foolish; natural processes alone can explain our origins and our destiny – which, according to them, is that we came from nothing and that we are going to nothing and so, when all is said and done our lives mean nothing. There's a cheery thought.

But it's not just forces outside the Church that are opposing us. No, the supposedly best trained and most enlightened theologians of our day are among the most vociferous of those telling us why we ought not believe what the Scriptures say. They tell us the texts are unreliable, that they're not truthful, and that they weren't written by the authors to whom they have been attributed who, by the way, didn't really exist at all. They are the literary creations of much later writers who only imagined them and made up their stories. These theologians, however, are quick to point out that there is good in the Bible, and that's what we ought to promote: its message of doing good to others and playing nice and equal justice for all. That's what Christianity is really all about. That's what we ought to be working toward.

But even where the Word of God is held in high regard, there's considerable difference of opinion in understanding what it means and how it should be applied – with the result that the kingdom of Christ appears to be divided, fragmented, and at war with itself. These are dark times indeed.

We see all this and we think it's been going on like this not for 700 years, but for 2000. Jesus said, "Behold, I come quickly"; but he appears to have redefined the term. Instead it seems like the day of the Lord's coming is like Little Orphan Annie's tomorrow – that wonderful time when everything will be better. The trouble with it is that it's always a day away. We never actually get there. And meanwhile we plunge ahead into the gathering darkness wondering

what the Lord is waiting for. Why does he let it go on? The world is filled with injustice, with hate, with disaster, with war and violence. There is so much human suffering. Jesus, if you're coming back, why don't you do it now?

It's to answer this complaint that James tells us, "Be patient, brothers, until the coming of the Lord." And unfortunately translating the word James uses as *patient* doesn't quite do it justice. The idea is more *forbear, persevere, dig in deep, hang tough*. It's not like you're waiting in line and have to be patient until it's your turn. It's more like doggedly riding out a storm. The implication is that it's not going to be easy. It's going to take some effort.

To illustrate James gives us several examples of what it means to exercise this kind of steadfastness. First the farmer who plants in expectation of the harvest, waiting for the early and late rains. In Palestine grains are a winter crop. The early rains come in October. They soften things up for sowing. The late rains come in February and March. They allow the plants to mature and form grain heads. The point is that the farmer can't make the rain come. That's in the Lord's hands. Still, he sows in faith expecting a harvest – and gets one. So we sow the Word of God in faith. We can't make it grow. We can't water it, so to speak. That's all in the Lord's hands. But the harvest will surely come. It always does. Wait for it.

James then holds up the example of the prophets, men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – all of whom were persecuted in their day. They were ridiculed. Their prophecies were rejected, considered foolish. They suffered terribly. Jeremiah was imprisoned. Tradition tells us Isaiah was martyred: placed into a log and sawn in two. But still these men died in faith clinging to the promises they proclaimed – and their messages have all proven to be true.

Finally, as an example of perseverance, James holds up Job who in the face of all his trials still held on in faith and hope to the compassion and mercy of God. When his world collapsed, he knew where to stand. "My Redeemer lives" he said. "And in the end, after my flesh has been destroyed, I will yet see him with my own eyes." Job knew that he would be raised again and restored by God if not in this life, then certainly in the next. As it turns out, he got it both ways. In view of these examples James urges you also to patiently persevere, saying, "Establish your heart, the Lord is at hand." Hear that? You, make your heart firm and strong.

Whoa. Wait a minute. Stop. That seems to fly in the face of everything we know about the Christian faith. We didn't create ourselves, God did. We don't redeem ourselves. That was the work of Jesus. Nor do we bring ourselves to faith in Jesus. That's the work of God's Holy Spirit. Neither are we able to make our hearts steadfast and strong in faith. That too is the work of God. So why is James telling us to do what only God for us? The answer is that in the establishing and strengthening of our hearts, we do have a role to play.

We know that God works through means. Specifically, we know that the Lord creates and strengthens faith through his Word rightly taught and his Sacraments rightly administered. Therefore where people are being baptized for the forgiveness of their sins, where they are confessing their sins and hearing Christ's words of absolution, where they are having read to them the Sacred Scriptures and having it properly explained, and where they are receiving the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion, there hearts are being firmly established and strengthened. There they are being given the kind of faith that endures until the end – whenever that may be. Thus knowing our inherent weaknesses, our propensity to lose hope, and our tendency to become discouraged, in telling us to establish our hearts, James is saying make sure that's where you are. Be the soil on which God is causing the seed to be sown. Be

where he is causing the life-giving rain of his Spirit to fall. Then his Word will grow within you. Then you will be given the strength and cheerful patience to endure until the end. Then you'll have the patience to be tolerant and forgiving of the weaknesses and foibles of others. Then you will produce a harvest of righteousness. And then you too will be ready for the Lord when he comes.

That's how the people who waited for Christ's first appearance endured. They held fast to the Words of the prophets who foretold who and what was coming. And that's how we too will endure: by establishing our hearts on the Words and promises of Jesus our Savior who is coming again soon. Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria