

Surely it is God who saves us

Sermon preached at the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA

by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, November 13, 2016

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (year C, proper 28):

Isaiah 65:17-25; Isaiah 12:2-6; Luke 21:5-19

Following the election this year, we are easily tempted to focus on our party or our candidate, regardless of whether or not our particular party or candidate won. Passion for good governance is good, but sometimes that passion can overwhelm us. We are tempted to put our trust in a champion or a party or a set of ideals to secure a good future. The temptation of every generation is to put party or leader ahead of God in our lives. And yet, God is the one who is trustworthy, and the one who gives us life.

In ancient times, God's people stood between the great powers of the world: Egypt on one side and great empires such as Assyria or Babylon on the other. Sometimes they made deals with the great powers for protection against the other. At home, they turned away from the Lord their God and worshipped other gods, forgetting that it was the Lord their God that made them a nation. The Kingdom of Judah in the south watched Assyria destroy Israel in the north. Judah boasted of the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem that would be their protection. But in their hearts they had turned away from God. As Ezekiel describes it, the Glory of the Lord left the temple. So Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and its great temple.

When the people turned their hearts back to the Lord, they returned to the land and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple. Years later, Jesus and his disciples came to the temple to worship God. They saw the great stones and the majesty of this huge building complex, even greater than the one before it. Like their ancestors, they marveled at its strength. But Jesus said to them: "not a stone will be left upon stone. All will be thrown down." But he told them that they, his disciples, will endure—not a hair of their heads will perish. No matter what goes on around them, they should trust in God as their strength, not in the temple, nor in the party of the zealots, nor in the power of Rome.

We could make the same mistake in our day. Consider our own temple. We delight in our buildings and grounds, as well we should, and we strive to take care of them, and we should. But these buildings are here for a purpose, and faithfulness to that purpose comes first. Our buildings are here to equip us to glorify God, to help us grow disciples of Jesus Christ, and to equip us to serve Christ in the world. As we are faithful to this vision, God will sustain us and bless us.

Time and again, we put our trust in the wrong places. We start to see our whole lives through the lens of politics or social life or career or wealth. But as great and powerful as those forces are in our lives, they are always fleeting, always changing. Even great buildings rise and fall. So how do we sustain a good life?

The Prophet Isaiah brought both judgment for the people and a vision of God's restoration. He preached about the promise of God's strength—greater than the Assyrian Empire, more powerful than hardship or defeat. Isaiah described the new heaven and the new earth that God will create. In the canticle that we read today (12:2-6), Isaiah says

Surely it is God who saves me
I will trust in him and not be afraid
For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense
And he will be my savior.
Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing
From the springs of salvation.

Isaiah's words to us today are a great reminder to us to keep things in perspective—in God's eternal perspective. Whatever is going on around us whether in victory or in struggle, *God* is the one that gives us life; *God* is the one to trust and the one to follow. *He* is the one that will sustain us.

Think about the challenges that this country has gone through in its history. Devastating conflict in the Civil War, hardship that some of you still remember in World War II and the Great Depression. Wars and recessions and the rise and fall of political parties and social movements. The greatest sustaining force in the midst of all of this history has been the power of God at work in his people.

I remember a story that a friend of mine told me. Rich Moore is a Lutheran pastor in Pennsylvania. He led a Bible Study at a retirement community near his church. In 2007, as the financial meltdown was impacting our country, the men of this study were fearful and worried. Rich asked them what they did in the Great Depression and in World War II. They told stories of how their families supported their neighbors and gave food to those who had lost everything. They look after each other, tightened their belts and continued to teach their children hard work and self-reliance, even while they were generous to others. They spoke of young men going off to battle on the other side of the world, bringing courage to face the greatest military powers the world had ever known in Germany and Japan.

They faced some of the worst kind of hardship—more than we have known or seen. And yet, one day at a time, they were sustained and they could face 2007 with confidence as well. It was God who sustained them then, and God who sustains us now. Our suffering comes when we take our eyes off of Jesus and put our trust in worldly powers.

God gave us courage in times of fear. God gave us generosity in times of scarcity. God called us to fidelity in times of turmoil. Who we are as a people will rise and fall on our fidelity to Jesus Christ whatever the circumstances may be.

40 years after Jesus' time, Rome destroyed the temple and persecuted Christians. But Christians, scattered throughout the empire brought the love of Jesus Christ to a hostile world. They had no temple in Jerusalem, they had no church buildings anywhere. They spoke to people person to person in marketplaces and homes, on the roads and in the fields. They shared with others the life changing freedom they found in Jesus Christ. They supported each other and reached out to the world around them. Whatever Rome might dish out in persecution was merely a new opportunity to bear witness to the power of Jesus in their lives. In time, Jesus won the hearts and souls of the people and the Roman empire was powerful no more.

So it is for us. As Christians, we do our best to be faithful as we participate in government and society. And we are right to be good stewards of our citizenship. We rely on a sense of safety and security as well we should. But even in such a safe and secure land, our fears can overcome us when we take our eyes off of Jesus. Our Lord has given us all that we need for a good life—in fact enough for us to be generous to others. When we put our trust in worldly powers, we will be disappointed—or worse, we risk turning away from God and suffering when we do. When we seek Jesus, however, when we put our trust in almighty God, we overcome any turmoil the world can dish out.

Who we are as Christians—sometimes quietly, sometimes boldly—has the most power to make a difference in the world. When we stay faithful to Jesus Christ and the call of God on our lives, we influence the world around us more powerfully than culture or politics or economics. We bring the power of Almighty God and the grace and love of Jesus, cutting through the challenges of this world. In any age, in any generation, the power that endures is the power of God who loves us and sustains us.

Surely it is *God* who saves us
 We will trust in *him* and not be afraid
For *the Lord* is our stronghold and our sure defense
 And *he* is our savior.
Therefore we will draw water with rejoicing
 from the springs of salvation.

And on this day we will say
 Give thanks to *the Lord* and call upon *his* name
Make *his* deeds known among the people
 See that they remember that *his* name is exalted
Sing praises to *the Lord*,
 for *he* has done great things and this is known in all the world.