

Stepping Out in Faith

In my office I have folders of lectionary readings and past sermons. When I looked through my folder for this week, I discovered that twelve years ago Raisin and I did a pulpit swap, going to each other's church. I was still at Christ Church in Burlington, and she was at Trinity, Iowa City. I ended up preaching three services at her church while she had only two at mine.

I knew the people in Iowa City and realized that each service would need a slightly different message. The earliest service had the oldest members, who would resonate with Jesus' words in the Gospel for today. "You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Because of their age, they knew their hour to meet Jesus was not that far away! The families at the middle, contemporary service needed to hear that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." They were concerned with their hopes for their children in an uncertain world. Those at the later formal Eucharist needed Isaiah's reminder that exquisitely executed liturgy is not, after all, what makes one right with God.

The Isaiah passage continues to intrigue me. It comes at the very beginning of the book. After establishing his identity and credentials, Isaiah provides the usual condemnation of Israel for its rebellion against God. But as he goes on, God says "come now, let us argue it out." Suddenly we discover that God is more interested in dialogue than harangue. For those who tend to think of God as an implacable judge, it's important to remember that God is always, *always* willing to forgive us if we choose to be obedient rather than rebellious. Psalm 50, which we said together after Isaiah, amplifies this sense by putting us within the heavenly courtroom as God argues his case.

That's why the reassurance from the Letter to the Hebrews is so important. When we step out in faith rather than turn away in rebellion, we need to know that God will follow through on what God has promised. This eleventh chapter has a long list of those who "died in faith without having received the promises." The list will continue next week. We heard that "from a distance they saw and greeted" those promises. Abraham and Sarah are the ancestors of so many before us who acted in faith even when the promise seemed distant.

Jesus provides us with additional encouragement. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom," he says. In other words, live as though the kingdom is already here. It may seem distant, but work to make it a reality. Choose your priorities wisely – your checkbook can tell you what they are, because "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Isaiah put it more concretely: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Do this because the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour, and you'd best be ready.

Somehow on that Sunday twelve years ago I managed to pull off a different approach at each service. I especially remember the thurifer's laughter when I thundered Isaiah's words, "Incense is an abomination to me!" He knew me too well to take me seriously. That day I preached three different sermons, but they all converged on the same message, one that I still find true today: live in faith and hope. Live in the conviction of things not seen. Live as though Christ will come again soon. New life has been given to you by the love of God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

[Pentecost 9: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20; Psalm 50:1-8, 23-24; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40.]