

Strength to Hang On

In the name of him who is coming to save us, dear friends in Christ: With Christmas Day now less than two weeks away I think it's fair to say that most of us have a general sense that something wonderful is about to happen. Yes, of course, we're looking forward to celebrating again the birth of our Savior whom God the Father sent to us in his love and to pondering afresh the mystery of the Word becoming flesh – the reason for the season, as they say. But we might as well admit it: there's a lot more to it than that. We also are looking forward to family gatherings and to spending quality time with loved ones who live away, to sharing festive meals and reenacting family traditions that make the season special for us, *and*, especially for the younger ones among us, to discovering what's inside those brightly wrapped packages that are gathering under the Christmas tree. For some the anticipation is almost unbearable. "I just can't wait", we hear them say.

But they can wait; and they will. No doubt someone bigger and whose voice carries more authority will see that they do. And since they have to wait anyway, it's best if they do so patiently. There's no sense in getting worked up over things you can't change. And to this end, to help them wait patiently, they'll also be given encouragement. That is to say, the same parent or guardian who's making them wait will be able to point to a date on the calendar and say, "Look. This is where we are now. When we get to *this* date, your waiting will be over. So hang on. The end is in sight." And this really does help. The certainty that the waiting period is relatively short and that it has a predetermined, known, and definite end imparts at least some of the strength needed to hang on.

And this works pretty much the same for a lot of the things we look forward to in life. Young children look forward to the day when they can start school. Older children and those in college look forward to the day when they'll be finished with school. Young adults look forward to the dates of things like their marriages, the births of children, and attaining promotions and levels of seniority in their careers. Older adults look forward to the day when their children will finally leave the nest and to when they can stop working and retire. There's some irony there, by the way, people looking forward to arriving at certain phases and stages of life, and then wanting them to be over once they do; but my point is that these things happen according to a schedule that is reasonably predictable and known. And being able to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel gives those who are on the way to the next goal, whatever it is, the encouragement and strength needed to lean forward, knuckle down, and keep moving toward it.

It's a lot tougher, though, to wait with patience when there is no foreseeable end in sight to the waiting period – when the end, when the time that things will improve, is unknown and there's no way to forecast when it might be. And there are a number of aggravating factors that can make this sort of waiting even worse; say for instance if the present situation you're in is particularly uncomfortable, when there's emotional stress or physical pain or conflict between you and others, and you're looking forward to relief from whatever it is; but there's no end in sight. And if while waiting in such a state you experience false hopes and disappointments – that is, you thought the end was right around the corner, that things were coming together to bring an end to your unhappy condition—but no, when you arrived at what you thought was the end and you turned the corner, you saw that the path just kept stretching out before to the vanishing point on yet another distant horizon – oh, that really makes it hard to be patient and keep going. In situations like that it's all too easy to give in to discouragement and lose hope.

You say to yourself, “What’s the point of pressing on? This is too hard for me. I can’t make it. I can’t hang on any longer. I give up.” Have you ever felt that way? I suspect most of us have.

Well, the reason I mention all of this is that as Christians we are to have the sense that something wonderful is about to happen – and no, I’m not talking about Christmas, which is just around the corner; but something far more magnificent. I’m referring to the coming of the kingdom of God; not the celebration of Christ’s first coming as a baby in Bethlehem, but his second coming to establish his glorious reign and to bring into being the new heaven and the new earth.

In this morning’s Old Testament lesson the prophet Isaiah, lacking the words to adequately relate the wonders to be revealed, is forced to use poetic terms to describe for us the age to come. He speaks of desiccated desert wastelands turning to lush gardens, burning sands becoming bubbling cool springs. He tells of the end of all human illness, disability, and suffering: the lame leaping like deer, the deaf and blind healed, the mute singing praises to God for joy. He speaks of the end of dangers and threats from wild animals – and by implication, from everything else in all of creation that might possibly harm us. We heard similar promises of God from the prophet in last week’s Old Testament reading. Then he spoke of a coming age of righteousness and peace, the lion lying down with the lamb, children playing safely over the nests of cobras, and the end of all war. It’s a world free of sin, sorrow, tears, and death that he describes.

My friends, these are not empty, “pie in the sky” promises, nor are they but the vain hope of fools. This is what the Lord God says is going to happen. These are things that he is going to bring about. And he tells us about them so that we will look forward to them with eagerness and with grateful anticipation – so that we will long for Christ’s return and the day of our salvation.

But he doesn’t tell us *when*. And there’s the rub: we can’t point to date on the calendar and say, “This is when it will happen.” We can’t even narrow it down. It could happen today, tomorrow, in two weeks, or two hundred thousand years. And in the meantime, until that day comes, all the rotten stuff that happens to people in this present age keeps going on. And when it happens to us personally – when we are the victims of disease and disaster and crime, when we experience the bitter sorrow of losing a loved one, when we suffer disappointments, setbacks, and losses – when such bad things happen it’s awfully hard to hang on and keep hope alive. We begin to succumb to doubt, which, if left unchecked, gives way to despair. We begin to wonder if maybe the Lord doesn’t know what he’s doing, or that he doesn’t care, or that he isn’t listening to our prayers, or that maybe there isn’t anyone there to listen to our prayers.

And it doesn’t matter who or how strong in the faith you are; under the right set of circumstances any one of us might begin to waver and fall. That’s what we see in today’s Gospel lesson. There it’s a person no less than John the Baptist, the mighty prophet of God, whom Jesus calls the greatest man who ever lived—he’s the one losing hope. Last week we heard about his fiery preaching as he prepared the way for Jesus, and how he boldly confronted people with their sins so that they would see their need for a Redeemer. His message was one of shock and awe. Later we know that he pointed his disciples to Jesus and said, “There he is: behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Then John had no doubts whatsoever. He was full of faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. He knew with absolute certainty that Jesus was the long-promised Christ of God.

But now, as we heard today, he's not so sure. Why? Two things: first, John had been arrested and placed in prison. It turns out that King Herod didn't like it much that John was accusing him publicly of adultery and living in sin because he had run off with his brother's wife and then divorced his own wife and sent her packing. So to silence his antagonist and end the bad press he was getting, Herod threw John in jail – and not just any jail; but the dungeon at the desert fortress at Machaerus, which was probably the nastiest, hottest hell-hole on earth. John, as you will recall, wasn't much given to living in the lap of luxury; but here his life was made truly miserable. He suffered immensely. And that might not have been so bad by itself; but adding to his anguish were the reports that he was hearing about Jesus. You see, John had expected Jesus to fulfill all the Messianic prophecies very soon. He saw Jesus as the one who would sweep away the wicked and set up his kingdom of righteousness and perfection right now. But that wasn't what was happening. Jesus was working with a different timetable than the one John had imagined. Instead of destroying sinners, John was hearing how Jesus was welcoming them and eating with them. Instead of confronting and overthrowing the corrupt religious leaders, Jesus was said to go out of his way to avoid conflict with them. Instead of raising an army to free the land from Roman oppression and set up his kingdom of everlasting justice and peace, Jesus rejected the very idea of ruling over an earthly kingdom, and when people tried to make him their king by force, he hid himself from them.

It didn't make any sense to John. "Here's the Lord's Messiah, the one who is to set the captives free; but here I am rotting in jail because I spoke the truth. That's just wrong. And what's Jesus doing about it? Nothing! Does he not understand who he is and what he's supposed to be doing? Or could it be that I was wrong about him? Maybe he's not whom I thought he was." This is the thought that settles on John's heart. And as the weeks and months pass by, the misery of his confinement ever increasing, and never even a hint as to when Jesus might actually start behaving like the kind of rescuer John hoped for, his doubts and fears grow, until at last they get the best of him. He breaks. His faith shatters. And he sends word by his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you *really* the one? Or should we be expecting someone else—that is, someone *better*, a *real* Savior, someone who will do things right?"

I don't imagine that Jesus was very pleased when the disciples of John asked this question on behalf of their teacher. It must have been disappointing to know that this once great champion of trust in him now gravely doubted what he had once confessed with such certainty. But Jesus doesn't angrily condemn him. He doesn't say, "How dare you question me? You'd better believe in me, or else!" Nor, it's interesting to me, does he offer John a detailed analysis of what he's doing and why. He doesn't explain himself. He simply instructs the disciples of John to deliver a message. Speak to John. Talk to him. Tell him what you've seen and heard: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

The meaning of the message is clear: "John, I am doing what the Scriptures say the coming Christ will do. I am fulfilling my mission. I am rescuing people. And just because I'm not moving fast enough to suit the schedule of your preconceived notions, nor doing things the way *you* think they should be done doesn't mean that I'm doing things wrong. It means that your expectations of me are wrong. It means that you've placed your agenda above mine. But that isn't how this works. I'm the one in charge. I'm the Lord and Savior. And I know what I'm doing. It's not your job to tell me how to do mine. Your part is to trust me – to trust me whatever happens to you. I am the Savior, and you can be confident that I will save you."

I have no doubt that John took mighty comfort in these words and that by them his faith in Jesus was restored. Why am I so sure? It's because this is the way the Lord operates in the world: he creates and strengthens faith in people through his spoken Word. In other words, it's the seed of God's Word that plants faith in the heart, and it's the Holy Spirit who always accompanies the Word who waters it so that it grows and blooms in the otherwise dry, lifeless desert of a sinner's heart. This is why too we hear in today's Old Testament, "Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees." But how is that done? Well, as the passage continues, "Say to the worried heart, 'Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance ... he will come and save you'." Understand then that this isn't just pep talk to rally the meager might of someone who's weak and failing, but rather that strength and the power to persevere and hang on in the faith are actually being communicated in and with the Words which God speaks.

God's Word is powerful. It does what it says it does. And one of the things it says it does is to comfort the troubled heart – like we sang in the last hymn: "*Comfort, comfort ye my people, speak of peace*", *thus saith our God*. And that word "comfort" is one whose meaning has been lost over the years. I mean, when we think of comfort, we think of plush pillows, soft beds, warm quilts, and easy chairs. If we imagine comforting someone who's upset, we think of sitting with them quietly, patting their hands, and saying "There, there; it'll all be better one day. You'll see." But honestly, what good does that do? None, really.

But with God's Word it's different. The Holy Spirit is sometimes referred to as the Comforter. It doesn't mean he's a heavy, quilted blanket or someone who doesn't know what else to do but to sit there with you when you're worried or grieving. No, the word *comfort* comes from two Latin words: "Com" which means "with", and "Fortus" which means strength or power. So to say that the Spirit is the Comforter means that he is the one who gives us strength, who gives us power – divine power through the Word of God – to hold on to Christ in faith and not give up in the face of trial and hardship however severe.

This is what the message of Jesus did for John. It restored his faith in Christ, who did indeed save John – not from death at the hands of Herod as he might have hoped – but rather through death; because not even death can harm those who by the power of God's Spirit trust in Christ. Jesus, by his death for our sin, opened for us the way to life. That's how he saved us. And through his Word and Spirit, he continues to speak to us, to give us strength and power to hold fast to him in faith, so that we too can hang on to him at all times; in every dreadful crisis and everything that falls short of one.

So, we don't need to know when our deliverance will occur to give us strength. We need only to know *that it will* occur in God's good time, according to his wise and loving plan for us. And when we are tempted to doubt and to despair, we know where to go: to God's promises, to his living Word, to the story of our Savior crucified for our sins and raised to life again, because it's by hearing the Word of God and the Gospel of our salvation that the Holy Spirit gives us true comfort: the strength to hold on to Jesus. May he give us the grace and wisdom to do so always, from now until he comes. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!