

“God Holds The Future”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, grace to you and peace.

There are some, these days, who think we are in a battle for the soul of the church. And I'm not just talking about our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada denomination, although it certainly, like any church denomination, has its problems. No there are those who suggest we are in a battle for the soul of the whole church in our time.

Wherever you turn, the church is changing and evolving toward something new, though it is not yet clear what that new form will look like. Our forms of worship are being challenged by repeated experiments to appeal to a new generation. Denominational loyalties are falling apart and many churches are trying to distance themselves from their own denomination. Many churches have even removed the denominational identity from their name and speak of themselves as a community church.

At the time of the Reformation, there was an attempt to define what made for a true church. The basic definition, for Lutherans anyways, was where the word of God is truly preached and the sacraments are rightly administered. The battles were over a doctrinal understanding of the faith. Today the battles within churches are largely over ethics rather than doctrine. We are greatly disturbed about issues surrounding abortion or sexual orientation for example, but do not worry so much about predestination, atonement or the meaning of sanctification.

Consumerism has so infected us that the first question for many church programs is what will please people rather than what will please God. We are moving through a time of change and as it says in the First letter of John, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, what we will be has not yet been revealed.” The question for Christians is how to remain faithful when it is hard to tell what it means to be faithful.

And so, this morning, I direct your attention to our first reading about that great prophet Elijah. Elijah is only one of two people in the Hebrew scriptures that we are told did not die. We don’t know much about the other one, but we do know a fair amount about Elijah. Elijah didn’t die but was taken up to God in a chariot of fire. We sing about him in that old spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.”

Because he did not die, the tradition developed that Elijah would return to prepare the way for the Messiah. If you are fortunate enough to be invited by Jewish friends to celebrate the Passover with them, you will note that there is a vacant chair at the table. That is the chair for Elijah. In what we call the New Testament, it is suggested that John the Baptist was Elijah returned to prepare the way for the Messiah, which in Greek is called the Christ. John even dressed in garments reflective of how Elijah was described in the Hebrew scriptures.

Elijah, as a transitional figure, shows us how we are to act in times of great change. Elijah prepares the way for us when things have grown chaotic. In our scripture lesson, Elijah and Elisha, his presumed successor, knows that things are about to change. What will happen is unclear but that something significant will happen is quite plain. In preparation for whatever is going to happen, the two prophets go on a journey.

Like the church, when we experience great changes taking place, Elijah and Elisha tried to revisit the great touchstones of their faith. They wanted to get back to the fundamentals. First they went to Bethel where their ancestor, Jacob, had this strange dream of a ladder extending between heaven and earth. It had been a place of critical change in Jacob’s life. He named that place Bethel, which is Hebrew for house of God. Like a church that wants to return to the way things were when all seemed right, so Elijah and Elisha wanted to return to where heaven and earth seemed well connected. Surely if Elijah was

being taken up to heaven, it would happen here. But nothing happened.

Next Elijah travelled to Jericho, the place where the walls came tumbling down at the sound of the trumpet. This was the turning point in the battle that enabled Israel to enter the promised land. Elijah and Elisha wanted to relive the moment of great victory when Israel had felt strong in the faith and God had clearly been on their side. It was like a pilgrimage to a great religious shrine. Surely this is where they could be close to God but nothing happened.

So they travel on to the Jordan River, that greatest of all rivers in Israeli existence. When they arrived, Elijah struck the water and it parted just like Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea. This recalled the great moment of liberation of the people of Israel. As a church we often seek places where we can experience clear signs of God's presence, signs of great spiritual awakening on the part of members. But even when we have travelled to the spot, like Elijah's protege, Elisha, we still face a uncertain future.

Elijah asked Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you before I am taken from you." Elisha responded, as we might respond, "Let me inherit a double measure of your spirit." In other words let me have a faith that can endure all the challenges of the future. Let me grasp the truth in a way that cannot be challenged.

Elijah responded, "If you see me as I am being taken from you, then it will be granted to you but if not, it will not."

Here we enter the great mystery of the church on which the soul of our faith rests. Here is where we have been journeying all along. The measure of Elisha's faith is whether he can see the invisible framework behind the visible reality of life.

This is what I mean. When Elijah had walked with Elisha a little further, suddenly there was a chariot of fire that separated them and Elijah ascended into heaven in a whirlwind. If anyone else had been standing there, they might have seen a great whirlwind pick Elijah up but only Elisha saw the chariot of fire behind the whirlwind. Only Elisha could see the power of God made visible in the chariot working behind the scenes to transport Elijah to heaven.

Friends, when you look at the church, what do you see? Many see a building, people, and an organization. All these things are visible and measurable. How big is your building? How many people attend worship? How many joined last year? What type of programs do you offer? But if you look through the obvious and the visible, can you see the invisible and the incredible presence of God?

As Christians we affirm the words recorded in the first chapter of Ephesians that God "has put all things under Christ's feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." Behind the visible signs of the church is an organization of people who join together on their journey of faith, there is an invisible force that is shaping the people of God as the church.

I recognize, you recognize that there are lots of storms swirling around the church as we move forward into God's future. From the outside, it may appear that the church is caught in a whirlwind that may destroy it. When Elisha saw the real presence of God behind all that was visible, he knew that whatever the future held, God held the future. Christ is the head of the body, we call the church, and Christ is not going to lose that with which it has been entrusted.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. As Jesus promised Peter, Christ will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Behind the visible organization that will inevitably change as it has in a variety of ways in the last 2,000 years, there is an invisible presence. For those who see it, they will not be afraid. God holds the future. AMEN.