

August 8, 2010

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Isaiah 1:1, 10-20, Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16, Luke 12:32-40

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When I was living in Cedartown Georgia it was not an unusual several times each year for the doorbell to ring just before dinnertime. A nicely dressed, smiling person would be standing on the front stoop of my home with a well worn King James Bible in their hands. They always wanted just a few minutes of my time so that they could witness to me about their relationship with Jesus. Very shortly into the one sided conversation the question, a question like, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" would be asked. It always delighted me to be able to unconditionally say, "Yes, I do. I am a pastor. Perhaps your time would be better spent somewhere else." The conversation would come to a pleasant but fairly quick end and they would be on the way to one of my neighbors – one of whom was a retired Baptist pastor and the other who referred to his wife affectionately as "Lightin'."

This morning I want to speak to you about something that is very important – and also very personal – your relationship with Jesus. I'm actually going to be so bold as to ask you the question, "Do you know Jesus Christ as YOUR Lord and Savior?" Wait. Did you hear that? Do your ears deceive you? Has an Episcopal priest really asked you the question, from the pulpit no less, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" Yep, there I go again. Looks like some of the preaching I heard on those hot August nights at the revivals my Grandmother took me to in Claxton, Georgia stuck! "Do you Know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?"

It should really be no surprise that I would be so bold as to ask you this. After all both of these questions about our relationship with our Redeemer are found in the Baptismal Covenant, the covenant we are all about to confirm again as a part of this morning's baptismal liturgy.

"Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?"

"Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?"

These affirmations are right there in the *Book of Common Prayer*, in print on page 302. The response, "I will, with God's help." is repeated by all baptismal candidates, or by their parents and godparents on their behalf. We all again embrace these affirmations when we all renew our own baptismal covenant. Do we accept? Do we follow?

Words are easy to say. Actions and day-to-day living is a whole different matter. This morning, here within these walls, with the prayers of the saints that have gone before us in this place, with our hearts and minds prepared for worship, perhaps we can and do say these words with our lips and embrace them in our hearts. Right now it is relatively easy, but what about...

What about next Sunday, when there is no ice cream at church and the coffee, the bacon and eggs and the newspaper call us away from our good intentions?

How about tomorrow when your child is slow in getting up and getting ready for the first day of school and you are already on edge because it's back to that old, more demanding routine?

What about Tuesday, when the opportunity to cut someone off in traffic presents itself and you don't hesitate to do what has just been done to you?

And then comes Wednesday, when you catch yourself about to be less than truthful about what ultimately is a rather insignificant matter, but it would be easier just to be somewhat less than truthful.

I'll let you fill out the rest of the week with your own thoughts.

In this morning's reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah we hear about God's displeasure with the Hebrew people of Judah. Things have not been going so well in their covenant relationship. Yes, the people have spoken the right words in worship. Yes, they have been doing good and proper liturgy. And yes, they have been making offerings and lifting their hands in prayers. But there is a really big problem, one that has haunted the human race since the beginning and will continue to haunt us as long as we draw breath. Words are easy to say, proscribed actions are easy to repeat.

Then there is the evidence of their actions. The widows and orphans are not being cared for or about. Trickery and deceit have become more the accepted practice in business rather than the rare exception. The weak and disenfranchised are trodden underfoot. Empty prayers are being offered. The Lord knows what lies behind false words and unjust actions. It is that which lives within our hearts and shows forth through our lives that is the true indicator of the health of our relationship with God. So, back to what I said I wanted to talk about this morning – that important and sometimes very personal aspect of our lives – our relationship with Jesus. Now let's turn our attention to this morning's second lesson.

The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is a first century Christian educator. He is writing to a Jewish audience who know the stories of God's saving acts from the moment of creation right up until the moment in which they find themselves living, actually until this present moment as his words reach across the centuries to our ears. By reminding his readers of God's past faithfulness in creation, God's fulfilling the promises to Abraham and Sarah, not only leading them into a new land, but also blessing them with Isaac when they were old and "as good as dead", all of the fulfilled promises and the repeated offering of a healed, new and deeper relationship between God and God's chosen people is called into memory. And even when we fell into the way of sin and death, God's continued in love, mercy and faithfulness by becoming one of us, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to reconcile us to God through his life, death and resurrection, to teach us and to restore our relationships to God and each other.

God calls out to us today. We come here seeking to be not only told of Abraham and Sarah's relationship with God, but also to be reminded of their faithful response to God's call. We come together today in song and prayer, in holy thanksgiving and seek God's help to fulfill our own baptismal covenant. We bring before God these young children to ask God to establish a new relationship with them, that they may be instructed and strengthened to grow into the full stature of Christ, with God's help. We know that we are strangers and foreigners on the earth but are seeking a homeland, with God's help.

Our struggles are no different than those of the first century. The details and complexities may be different, but in the final analysis the issues are not that much different. We all struggle with the day-to-day temptations and opportunities that draw us away from God and cause us to set aside our baptismal commitments. Look around this place. Look thought the bulletin announcements. Study our web page, or the web page of the Diocese of Atlanta.

There are so many opportunities to serve, to learn, to seek and experience a deeper and relationship with the one who loves us all beyond measure. So many ways to learn how to grow in Christ, deepen our relationship with God and in faith. We can, with God's help come to know more fully Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior.

And if you think this is too difficult to accomplish, go back and read the first line of today's Gospel, "Do not be afraid little flock, for it is the Father's *good* pleasure to give you the kingdom." The Kingdom has already been given to us. We do not need to be afraid.

Let us pray.

God of judgment and grace,
you ask not for sacrifices
but lives of trusting faith
that acknowledge your power and mercy.
Give us faith as deep and strong as Abraham's and Sarah's,
that we may follow you through all our days
as did Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.