



Emmanuel Episcopal Church

Sharing the Joy and Power of Life in Christ

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The Rev. John A. Baldwin, Rector

Sermon for May 17, 2009

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

The Rev. John A. Baldwin

Three weeks ago I went to prison for a weekend....as part of a 15 member Kairos team. We went to Brunswick Correctional Center in Lawrenceville, VA to bring the love of God, as manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, to men who are thirsty for Christian community. It was a renewal weekend very similar to Cursillo with lots of music, worship, reflection, and talks about the Christian faith in action. This morning I would like to share with you a meditation I gave at Kairos entitled "I Will Never Forget You." Although it was meant to speak particularly to men behind prison walls, with issues of abandonment by family, friends and society, I believe it has equal value for all of us when we are challenged with the realities of loneliness, divorce, the loss of a significant loved one, the loss of a job, or the search for meaning in our lives.

I begin with a powerful passage of scripture from the prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her own baby and not love the child she bore? Even if a mother should forget her child, I will never forget you. Jerusalem, I can never forget you! I have written your name on the palms of my hands. Isaiah 49:15-16a (Good News Bible)

These words from the prophet Isaiah (from a period nearly 700 years before the birth of Jesus) are addressed to the people of Israel who are in exile in Babylon. They are far from their homes, captives in a foreign city....dispirited, depressed.....fearful they will spend the rest of their lives in a place where they are abused and disrespected. Questions swirl in their hearts and minds. Why did God allow this to happen to us, whom he claims as his own special "Chosen People?" Does he no longer care about us? Has he forgotten about us completely? ...and if he has indeed forgotten us, is there any room for hope at all?

To this sad and hopeless people Isaiah speaks words of tenderness. Just as a loving mother cherishes the child she cradles in her arms and nurses, so God loves you intimately too. He has not forgotten you. You are in his heart forever. These words have sustained the Jewish people through the centuries amidst calamities and atrocities. Scattered across the world, dislocated by persecution and warfare, the victims of pogroms and the Holocaust (Adolf Hitler's unspeakable evil), the Jewish people have been strengthened and held together by their enduring belief that God has not forgotten. We

are still his Beloved, no matter what hatred the world may throw at us. Christians too, have this same, deep belief that we are cherished by God. Paul writes in Romans 8, "I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God does not forget us....there is nothing that can separate us from God ...except our own blindness, our own unawareness of that reality.

What this means to me is that there is no place I can go where I will be forgotten by God.....not even in my loneliness, not even in solitary confinement, not even in the most desperate moments of my life will God forget me. But I want to be very clear that this remembrance is full of love. He remembers us as the child He formed in the womb, as the infant embracing life with smiles and laughter, as the little boy wondering what life is all about, as the teenager wounded and at times bewildered by life's challenges, as the person He hoped we would become. He remembers our gifts and potential. He weeps at our pain, mistakes, and stumbles. He never gives up on us.

Now some may harbor a view of God's remembering that is less joyful and optimistic than what I believe in my heart. In fact, it may even seem downright scary and ominous. It could be summed up by that ditty about Santa Claus "He's checking his list, and checking it twice. Gonna find out who's naughty or nice." This kind of remembering is all about judgment, and it's not what's at the heart of these words of Isaiah. A loving mother, nursing her child knows in her heart that her child will misbehave. But she's going to love him anyway. God knows that we will fall short, make serious errors of judgment, hurt others by our words and actions, but he loves us anyway.

The power of the Gospel lies in our belief that God does not remain aloof and distant from the human condition, but has entered into it in Jesus Christ, in order to experience all of the pain and suffering we experience, in order to know what it's like to be betrayed by our friends, to be treated like a criminal, to be misunderstood, and to be the object of anger and ridicule. Because God has experienced the heights and the depths of human living, he knows us intimately in our strengths and our weaknesses. And He remembers.

For the Israelites of long ago, for those who have been victims of human cruelty, for those who have been isolated from human contact, and for everyone who feels lonely and cut off, God's remembrance is perhaps the only thing that can sustain us through times too deep and painful for words. God will not forget us, not now, not ever. Amen.