

Holding Fast

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-40; Psalm 98 11-11-07

All three of our scripture readings, in one way or another, contain words of encouragement. Life can be a dark and difficult thing if we never hear encouraging words as we move along; if we never hear praise, or get a literal or figurative pat on the back. It takes little to offer encouragement to another, sometimes something as simple as, “That was a beautiful anthem,” or “That was a tasty dinner,” or, “My you look nice.” Most times through these simple words, we are encouraged to hang on, to hold fast to life and all its promise. We are told that there will be a time when things do come out right.

We find words of encouragement in many places. All we need is to be aware of what is going on all around us and determine that we will not have a negative outlook on life and that we will begin to look for the positives that are present, sometimes hidden, but always present.

In that hymn we just sang, “Be Still, My Soul,” one of my favorites that I hope will be sung at my memorial service, there are these words:

*Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side!
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide:
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul, thy best thy heavenly Friend,
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.*

The sense of encouragement we should garner from these words is that God is on our side, that we really do not have control over life, our Creator orders life and also provides what we will need. God will lead us through dark times to the joy that will be ours at the end of any and every bit of turmoil we might face. This hymn encourages us to look beyond where we are at the moment and to discover the broader view of life, the greater picture. I hope that we all listen to the words of our hymns—many are full of deep meaning and can bring us great comfort.

Of course, we can find wonderful words of encouragement, words that tell us to hold fast, the days will get better in many popular songs.

Remember “Annie?”

*The sun will come out, tomorrow
Bet your bottom dollar that tomorrow there'll be sun
Just thinking about, tomorrow
Clears away the cobwebs and the sorrow
'Til there's none.*

*When I'm stuck with the day that's gray and lonely
I just stick out my chin and grin and say, ohhh*

*The sun will come out tomorrow
So you gotta hang on 'til tomorrow*

Come what may....

And there is always John Lennon's "Imagine."

*Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace*

*You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one*

*Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world*

*You may say that I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one*

In spite of the words in that song that tell us to "imagine there's no religion," the base of this song is also the base of all religions—the desire that we may be united as one. Bishop John Shelby Spong said, at a lecture at Hartford Seminary that some of us attended a few years ago, "If all religions could find the 'pearl of great price' that is central to their belief system and sit down with others who have discovered the 'pearls' in their faith systems, there would be such a unity." Most likely there would be. We are all human and finding what unites us instead of divides us is the key to peace.

And then there are the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

"There is a point with me in matters of any size when I must absolutely have encouragement as much as crops rain: afterwards I am independent."

I have a dear friend who always seems to find words of encouragement for me when I get a bit down. Thanks to the wonders of the Internet and email, I am able to hear from him fairly regularly. This poor, dear soul, has unbelievable patience with me and sifts and winnows all the email blabber he receives, especially when I find the world too much with me. His responses are like a gentle rain falling on the parched ground of my existence at those times and I am renewed and refreshed and able to see things in a new light.

Now, think of our readings for this morning. All of them point to a better future. One tells us that a time will come when the temple in Jerusalem will be restored to its former glory. Haggai encouraged the remains of the nation Israel to put their faith where it belonged and to move forward.

Jesus reminded people that there would be a time when we dwell beside God on the next level of life, where there are no earthly concerns, rules or regulations made by humans that seek to corral us and keep us from a more complete union with one another and with our Maker. We will at last all be one. No prejudices, no walls that separate. It's no wonder his questioners stopped asking questions. He was at least one step ahead of them all.

The Second Letter to the Thessalonians was full of words of encouragement for those who followed the Way in terrible, tough times. The church was being shaken by teachings that were not true—it was being pulled in different directions. The words of Paul sought to calm down the fever that was spreading, and, through encouragement, point those early Christians back to the pathway that was true for them. They had to hold fast to their faith – the Way that accentuated the positive-- and they needed to eliminate the negative.

As followers of Christ we are called to support and encourage one another. Sometimes this takes patience, sometimes humility, sometimes forgiveness, often understanding and always a large measure of love. It requires that we listen and evaluate what it is we are hearing in another's frustration, fear and longing. After we have listened with loving focus and held them in our hearts and soothed them with words of support and encouragement, we can take one step farther, reminding them of a solace found in these words:

Be still, my soul, thy God doth undertake

To guide the future as He has the past;

Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake:

All now mysterious shall be bright at last.

Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know

His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

-- Amen