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B Advent 02

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### Neglect Or Patience?

I bring you greetings from our church's Presiding Bishop, Katherine Jefferts Schori. Bishop Katherine was the guest of the convention of our diocese, which met Friday and Saturday. She celebrated the Eucharist, preached, gave the first lecture of an annual series in which she spoke of the contributions and power of women in ministry, and held a 45 minute question and answer period. She is a woman of dignity and grace, calm intelligence and firm charity. She was altogether a breath of fresh air, especially in the poisonous atmosphere engendered by the uncharitable, heretical break-aways that we read about in our newspapers. She spoke of international church work and the work of the individual heart equally, with perception and wisdom, firmness and kindness, that made you want to hear more. Having admired her from a distance, I can now report to you my conviction that God has given her to us as a most constructive and healing leader in these difficult times. She is one that we will always want to listen to.

The rest of the diocesan convention was mundane and strengthening. It's the sort of thing we do at our parish annual meeting in January: we review the past year, hear reports, plan for the year to come, adopt a budget, elect workers into the various ministries of the diocese. Not terribly exciting but the necessary housework of any democratically run organization; it is one of the ways in which we bring alive the ministry of all God's faithful, the laity and the clergy.

If the convention is mundane, it is also strengthening. In it we get to see a bigger picture than we see at home or in our parish. We see how others go about being disciples of the Lord. Their ingenuity and

devotion are truly inspiring, often humbling. You look at these marvelous works and feel a bit inadequate, at least I do. But in that humbling is also strength, for we begin to realize that we are all in our various ways doing the work of the Lord God, bringing the creative healing power of the Father to a hurting world, bringing the dedicated love of the Son to tortured hearts, bringing the amazing power of God's Spirit to the dispirited. We return from convention a bit tired and with sore bottoms from sitting so much, but also with encouragement to do the work God has given us in our own lives.

I came away from the diocesan convention with a sense of new hope that is altogether proper in this season of Advent. It is easy to get discouraged by the bumps in the road of our pilgrimage to God, whether those bumps be personal, local, international, psychological, theological, or a myriad others that wear us down. But hear again the message of our scripture readings on this second Sunday in Advent. For several Sundays we have heard reminders that the history of the world has a purpose, that it is going somewhere, that God is involved, that God is working Her purposes out, and that eventually it will all come to a dramatic climax in the end of time and space, that our lives will be transformed by God's power and grace into new, eternal life and meaning.

But meantime there is reason to be optimistic and hopeful, for Emmanuel is the name of God's way with us, that is, God is with us. That presence and care are expressed in different ways.

Our *Isaiah* reading was spoken to a people broken by defeat and exile, living in slavery in Babylon six hundred years before the Bethlehem Baby. "Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God." All is not lost. The way back home is prepared; justice is satisfied; mercy is ascendant; the wilderness is tamed; God guides Her people in the midst of the ephemeral and the passing away. "Here is your God! See, the

Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him,... He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” This compassionate care is firm and eternal, bringing encouragement into the fragility and shortness of life, fragility that is like dying grass and wilting flowers. God says that is not our end at all. There is more to our life than the exile and wilderness we seem now to be going through.

Psalm 85 is full of such hope and encouragement that there is not time enough in this sermon to address them all. But I invite you to read the words of the psalm again, slowly and meditatively. They’re summed up by verse 8: “I will listen to what the Lord God is saying, for he is speaking peace to his faithful people and to those who turn their hearts to him.”

Our gospel reading is the first words of the first chapter of the first gospel written. Mark proclaims “The beginning of the **good news** of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark knits together the ancient encouragement of Isaiah with the mysterious events of the life of Christ. First comes John out of the wilderness drawing those hungry for the right way of life into a humble acceptance of God’s claim on them. Mark will go on from this prophet to the one of whom he prophesies, Jesus of Nazareth, whom Mark sees as God’s beloved Son. This Beloved Son, the Bethlehem Baby, is the reason for all our hope.

Our epistle reading is from the Second Letter of Peter. The author honestly addresses a question for his people and for us: where is God? Is God’s seeming absence a sign of neglect and not caring, as we all too often interpret it. No, says Peter, this time of waiting is not a mistaken interpretation on our part or neglect on God’s part. It is a sign of God’s patience, of His determination that all shall be well with all Her people.

The slowness of God allows time for change in people's lives. The slowness of God is God's patience, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3.9) "...regard the patience of our Lord as salvation." (3.15)

Do not we need to hear these words, you and I who are living in frightening times? We are slogging through a wilderness: a wilderness of fear, of mindless murder and mayhem, of the failure of our government to provide order, of the collapse of our economic system (our crops are failing). Even some of our religious leaders – where we have every right to expect encouragement, cooperation, and humility – are inflamed with self-righteousness, anger, and divisiveness.

Do not be deceived. This wilderness is not God's reality; it is the exile in Babylon. God is leading us through the wilderness. God is not neglectful, but patient. God is Emmanuel, God-with-us. God is the Bethlehem Baby, whom we await with such hope and expectation. God is leading us home to Jerusalem, to the promised land, to the Temple where He lives with us forever. God is in Christ, reconciling and healing all our brokenness into the fullness of His own life. We are most fortunate of peoples. That is part of the message I heard from Bishop Katherine in the everyday routine of diocesan convention business. It was wonderful.