

NOT FORSAKEN

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

More Painful than losing our way or getting lost is the mental anguish caused by the thought that those able to find us abandoned us. A sailor lost at sea as his ship cruises on unaware, the prisoner of war wasting away in the Hanoi Hilton having given up hope of being released, or a child lost at Christmas time in a shopping mall dreading that mom and dad will never show up. The feeling that we've been forgotten and given up on is actually worse than getting lost in the first place. Sometimes members of our congregation feel ignored in time of need. Nobody called you. Nobody visited. In our finer moments we think of ourselves as a caring congregation and, I think, for the most part we are. But it's part of the nature of suffering that we feel acutely alone when we suffer. When we suffer, we feel intensely the pain of separation. We feel forsaken.

Now with this thought in mind I want to address our church officers and especially those to be ordained and installed today. Never give up on ~~God's~~ ^{Christ's} church. Don't give up on God's people. Sometimes we're tempted to ~~do that~~ ^{give up} when our hopes and plans fail or are thwarted. You elders and deacons will soon discover first hand that we're not all God wants us to be as a church. ^{We're often silent in the face of injustice,} ~~There's a lot of biblical illiteracy among us. Some of us don't know basic Christian beliefs—like God's unconditional love, grace and mercy that comes through faith in Christ.~~ ^{And talk too much when we should keep silent. We often play it too safe and other times act foolishly.} Many of us aren't really convinced that the institutional church is all that important. Many of us don't realize that church membership is a call to discipleship and service. Some believe we're far too conservative and traditional, and others fear we becoming far too liberal and permissive. And many of us are confused in our spiritual journey. Elders and deacons are called by God through the voice of the congregation to love, serve and pray for the church with the hope of seeing us become, one day, *a crown of glory*.

So I charge all of you elders and deacons, don't give up on ~~the~~ ^{Christ's} church. One of the most effective ways of destroying a person's faith is electing them to the session or board of deacons. Elders and deacons get burned out. They get frustrated. Sometimes they get angry. Our plans are thwarted. Too often we want to give up on God's people. ^{Unless we keep Isaac's vision ~~in front~~ before us} So I charge you to work and pray for the church *until our righteousness shines out like the dawn, and our salvation like a burning torch.*

The prophet Isaiah was a church officer. Biblical scholars have identified at least three prophets who authored the Old Testament book of Isaiah. ^{587 BC} The first Isaiah lived in Jerusalem before it was conquered. He warned his people to repent and get right with God or else their nation would be destroyed. The second Isaiah lived in Babylon with the exiled people of God after the city and temple were destroyed. Second Isaiah consoled God's people and told them how much God loved them and would restore their fortunes. The third Isaiah accompanied the people of God from Babylon back to the Promised Land which had become a God forsaken pile of rubble. God's people looked all around and saw only ruins -- toppled city walls, the once glorious temple of God and pile of rubble, the royal palace ramshackled and dilapidated. God's people felt forsaken and desolate. But the third Isaiah promised never to give up on his people until they had become all God had promised.

God called Isaiah to serve his people and to pray for them. And in our Old Testament scripture lesson we hear Isaiah affirm his ordination vows, *For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet, until her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.*" In other words, Isaiah says, "I'm not going to shut up until God's people are all they should be. I'm not going to give up on them. I can't give up on them any more than God can. I won't keep quiet. And I'm going to pray for them without ceasing." Isaiah will do this because he has hope. Isaiah sees God's people as they *shall* be and *should* be and *will* be. "You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God."

Isaiah never gave up hoping. I think of Dr. Martin Luther King on the eve of his birthday tomorrow. He found himself in a similar situation in the dark days of legal segregation and Jim Crow laws – but he wouldn't give up. He said, *the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land. Confusion all around.... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough, can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century.* He wouldn't give up on America. *I will not rest, until her righteousness shines out like the dawn.* He wouldn't give up on God's promises for his people. *You shall no more be termed*

Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her. He believed in the power of God to make a way out of no way. That's what Isaiah was saying.

I think of a scene in my favorite movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Remember the mansion that became the Bailey home? When we first see the mansion it's a dilapidated, ramshackled affair. Donna Reed breaks one of the remaining windows with a well aimed throw of a stone and makes a wish. She just graduated from high school but she loves George Bailey and hopes to marry him one day and make that hovel their home. Time goes by. Eventually George Bailey and Mary get married but they're interrupted on their way to their honeymoon by the Stock Market crash. There's a run on George Bailey's savings and loans company. People want to withdraw all their money. That would kill the bank as well as the hopes and dreams many poor people had of owning a home. So Mary offers to use all their honeymoon money to meet the clients demands. When the bank shuts its doors at the end of the day they're left with two one dollar bills. They open a champagne bottle, drink a toast, dance around the two dollar bills, put them in the bank vault and pray for them to have lots of baby dollar bills. In the next scene George Bailey receives a telephone call from his bride telling him to meet her at that old ramshackled house. ~~It's raining, the roof is leaking~~ — but his wife has a fire burning in the fireplace and she has prepared a romantic meal on a makeshift stove. Bert and Ernie, the two town cops, serenade the newly weds and with the eyes of faith they begin to see what their home might become with a lot of prayer, love and hard work.

Dear congregation, elders and deacons - God will give us eyes to see what God wants to make of us. We already have a beautiful building but we have a long way to go before *our righteousness shines out like the dawn, and our salvation like a burning torch*. Don't give up on God's promises. Don't stop working and praying until our righteousness shines out like the dawn. Believe God's promises! *We shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of our God.... As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall our God rejoice over us.*

Almighty God, your Son our Savior Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illumined by your Word and Sacraments, shine with the radiance of his glory, that he may be known, worshiped, and obeyed to the ends of the earth; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.