

“What Stands Forever?” Meditation offered by Rev. W. Dale Osborne  
December 10, 2017 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – Peace  
Lectionary texts: Isaiah 40: 1-11; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13; Mark 1: 1-8

This morning I have titled my meditation, “What Stands Forever?” Sometimes I firmly believe that I know exactly what stands forever. Does anything stand forever for you? Ever since I could understand human speech, and maybe even before such a time as my infancy, I believe I have had some understanding of what stands forever. The word of God, the Love of God, the imperfect knowledge of this reality under which we live our lives and exist, that is what stands forever. As a Christian I have been taught and I have grown to believe that the word of God, embodied in Jesus the Christ is what stands forever. The author of John’s gospel did his best to convey this concept in his prologue. It has stuck with me even to this very day. But, my belief in the Word of God, standing forever, rides right alongside one of my other life questions though. That question, What is forever? I daresay no one, no thing has any true concept of forever. I believe that I am present and in full existence right now, in this very moment. Forever must be a little further along. Forever must also be in my rear view mirror. I have no idea which one, which forever, is larger. Perhaps they are always equal.

Our Old Testament passage from the prophet Isaiah holds the phrase from which my meditation title gets its birth. Verse 8 reads, “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever.” Now why in the world would the Israelites need to hear such a phrase? To answer that question I will lean on Dennis Sanders, a contributing scholar to the magazine called the Christian Century. His words contain information some of you know completely. His insights also contain concepts we all need to hear. Sanders writes,

*Isaiah 40 opens up Second Isaiah, written to a community in exile. It had not been a good time in the life of many Jews. A century before, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians. Many people were taken away to live in a foreign land, never to return. Others became refugees who streamed to the Southern Kingdom. Then the Southern Kingdom fell to the new superpower, the Babylonians. Again some people were forced to live in exile, while others were stuck in the ruins of post-apocalyptic Judah.*

*Israel was gone. Judah was gone. The king was gone. The temple was gone. Everything they once knew was gone forever. They sat in Babylon, wondering if it would ever come back.*

*God responds with comfort. “Comfort, comfort my people.” God is no longer angry that God’s chosen people have walked away. God wants the people back. God calls the people to build a highway for God, a way that God can be with the people again. God tells the people that their post-apocalyptic world will be hopeful, because God cares for God’s people. God then tells them to proclaim the good news to all people.*

*This was a message of hope to the exilic community in Babylon. Things are terrible now, but take comfort: there is a tomorrow. God had not left the Israelites alone.*

*As I’m writing this, I think of my relatives in Puerto Rico, living in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Around the world, people are seeking comfort, seeking something that will take away the pain.*

*As followers of Jesus, we can’t magically take away the pain of those hurting. But maybe we can be bearers of great comfort, comfort greater than we can imagine. In a world filled with wildfires*

*and category five hurricanes, we believe that even if the world ends, God is there. God doesn't end. We believe that God in Christ will bring hope in a land filled with despair.*

This message of peace and comfort in the midst of pain and confusion can ring true for many a community. It stands out for all of us at Binkley today. My apologies to any worshippers who are visiting our sanctuary for the first, second or perhaps third time today. You may not follow exactly what I am about to convey. Suffice it to say that our church community has been wandering for a while. Not wandering so much in exile or oppression by an overpowering army of Babylonians, but wandering as a community, or perhaps as several communities. Binkley's wandering communities are not of one accord as we seek out a new settled pastor for our congregation. I have been in conversation with many members of our church in the past few weeks. They represent primarily themselves but also the listening ears of people they trust and respect. As I have listened to members of our church discuss our current condition, one truism stands clear. Every single member of this congregation who is engaged in conversations about the future of Binkley has the very best interests of this church at heart. Let me say my perceived truism again, **“Every single member of this congregation who is engaged in conversations about the future of Binkley has the very best interests of this church at heart.”**

That truism should make for a very rosy outlook for the church. Unfortunately, in our current reality, in our current place in the concept of forever, it does not. Due to our humanity, due to our abilities to speak and understand matters from differing points of view, and due to the horrific possibilities contained within electronic communications, we have managed to experience hurt during our wandering time. We have found ourselves fearful, sorrowful and hopeful all at the same time. I can claim all of these feelings myself. Perhaps many of you can as well. “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Binkley Baptist Church.”

While there are a multitude of concerns, questions, rumors and fears wrapped up in our wandering community of faith, I choose today to speak of only one. It is the one to which I have some intimate knowledge. I know it is one of many, and many more may be answered in the church in conference following today's worship service. I speak now to the concern that a YES vote on our upcoming vote on a potential call to Marcus McFaul as our settled pastor would create a situation where your Associate Minister, me, would need to be fired or dismissed from service at the church. The accompanying rumor I have been made aware of is similar. If Marcus walks in the door, Dale will immediately walk out of his own accord. None of this is true as far as I am concerned. God, through the work of a diligent search committee, called me to service at this incredible church over 25 years ago. I remain grateful for that call. I am speaking clearly and solely of my personal situation as a staff member of this church. You are stuck with me for the time being. In our current place in the concept of forever, God has placed us among one another for the purposes of expanding the kingdom of God on this earth. We, the church called Binkley, have a mission, a mission that supersedes all of our concerns about ministerial leadership. The Word of God that stands forever, beckons us to expand the love of Christ in the world as we reconcile ourselves one to the other. For if we are truly reconciled with one another then God will be glorified and the love of God will expand.

My heart aches for every member of this church who has experienced personal or group pain and suffering during the season of searching and wandering at Binkley. I consider each and every one of you to be the most beautiful creations God has brought forth. We are all indeed, goodly grass and fragrant flowers. We will eventually wither and fade just as the words from Isaiah proclaim. We will either call a new settled pastor today or we will not. That is a current reality. What will stand forever, regardless of our vote, is the word of God, the love of God, the beloved child of God to whom we owe so much. These things will not fade or wither. As you look around the room in this

moment of worship, and as you gather in conference today, I encourage you to look at one another and see the face of Jesus. See the love of the risen Christ. "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to one another in Jerusalem" and in Binkley's sanctuary.

#### Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before 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.

#### Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."