

Anticipating the Reign of Christ – Advent 2010

A Multi-Ethnic Congregation

December 12, 2010

**Isaiah 35:1-10 & Acts 2:1-13
(Hymns – 475, 277, 118, 110)**

I am convinced that Brentwood Presbyterian reflects better than most congregations I know the future of the church.

First and foremost,
it is a congregation that knows and values
the promise of God to be with us.
It's a simple but profound awareness
that shapes every dimension of our lives and work.
When we started to work together last fall
and I asked you what you valued most
about what this congregation offered you,
one of the most frequently expressed convictions
was that God was with you and supported you,
no matter what was happening to you.

The same conviction came through loud and clear
in the answers that you gave to Cindy Johal
when she was doing the research for her master's degree.
Central to your understanding of how collaboration and community
happen in a congregation like this
is trust in God's presence and his power bring people together
in a community that nourishes souls to flourish in Jesus Christ.
As we worship together, learn together,
enjoy fellowship together, and serve together,
we are rejoicing in God's presence,
strong and fearless in our faith
because we know in the very depths of our souls
that Jesus Christ is with us and for us.

That bedrock conviction is the foundation for the future flourishing
of this congregation.

The core promise of God's steadfast love
is written on our minds and hearts –
"Fear not, for I am with you."

The end of the passage from Isaiah that we read responsively this morning captures the benefits of this conviction eloquently:

*Those whom the Lord has rescued
will travel home by that road.
They will reach Jerusalem with gladness,
singing and shouting for joy.
They will be happy for ever,
forever free from sorrow and grief.*

The context for this passage is the return of the exiles from Babylon. It's a new exodus, bringing freedom yet again from slavery. God makes it possible by transforming the desert into a fertile and supportive environment, just as he did during the first Exodus. God's presence yet again, and still, protects and provokes. He cares for his people and challenges them to use their freedom wisely.

Using our freedom wisely under the care and guidance of the Holy Trinity – that's the basic recipe for flourishing as a congregation that I find in the Scriptures.

And the account of Pentecost that we read from the Acts of the Apostles this morning adds another important dimension to our understanding of the strengths of Brentwood Presbyterian. This is where the multi-ethnic part comes in. When I describe to people the ethnic makeup of our congregation, they are quite amazed. Yet I am convinced that this richness of backgrounds, all coming together around God's promise to be with us in Jesus Christ, is a real strength in our current context.

Ten of us spent various parts of yesterday at Brentwood Town Centre inviting people to join us for Jazz Vespers next Sunday and help us collect winter clothing for the children served by Dixon House. The ethnic mix of our neighbourhood is remarkable. People from around the world have come to live here in Brunaby seeking for the freedom and strength we know comes ultimately from a relationship with Jesus Christ.

At Pentecost, the excitement is around believers from every country in the world talking in their own language, their own native tongues, about the great things that God has done.

The diversity is real and affirmed as good.
We do not all have to become the same
in order to join together and share the great things
God has done in Jesus Christ.

There is a wonderful phrase in our *Book of Forms*
(the principles and rules that guide our work as a church)
that describes the session's responsibility for Christian education.
Opportunities to learn with the church
should confront people with the gospel
so they may grow in the faith,
participate in the life of the Christian community,
and be active witnesses to Christ in the world.

Those are the activities,
nourished by the strength and freedom we have been given in Jesus Christ,
that form the unity of the church.

We are enriched in participating in those activities
by the various experiences and understandings of the faith
that Jesus Christ has nurtured in each and every one of us.

The more opportunities we find here at Brentwood
to talk with each other about the ways our faith sustains us to flourish,
the richer our understanding of the depths and breadth of God's grace will be.
Building on the wisdom generated at our congregation consultation in November,
the session will be designing more of those opportunities
in the new year.

Pentecost points to the world-wide reach of the Christian faith.
People from all over the world had come to live in Jerusalem
and were attracted and convinced by what God had done in Jesus Christ.
They accepted God as their Father, Jesus Christ as their Saviour,
and the Holy Spirit as their Sanctifier.

They shared a desire to walk in God's ways,
a willingness to seek the peace and welfare of the church,
and a loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord.

The same is happening here in Burnaby and here at Brentwood.
Our diversity is a gift from God and a real source of strength for us.
We need to celebrate it, learn what it means for us,
and invite others to enjoy it with us.