

“Never Departing” Isaiah 54:1-10

“...the mountains may depart and hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you....”

Christmas is so often a time filled with travel--- of going to--- or leaving behind--- and then returning once again. Children and grandchildren come home to visit, ---or grandparents find themselves on the road or in the airport. We long for and desire to be with the ones we love the most at Christmastime. It's almost an innate instinct, or at the very least--- a tradition which is deeply conditioned within us.

We desire to be together at Christmas--- and when we are not--- we feel the tension and pull of unease--- even a lack of completeness. Recent deaths can exasperate such feelings. If there is a strain in the relationship between members of a family, some unresolved issues or challenges, this can make separation even worse. There's second guessing, obsessing over the reasons why, and even a cloud of guilt hovering close at hand. We easily see that for all the joy of Christmas--- there can also be sadness, even anger, and emotional confusion.

Even people of great faith, who internally realize our focus on Christmas should be upon the gift of the Christ Child, can experience such emotional highs and lows. We are not perfect, after all, and the dynamics of extended family issues, are usually beyond our control. Yes--- we can influence--- and we can attempt to make the best diplomatic choices--- but in the end we cannot control other persons' words, emotional response, nor actions. So we each arrive here on Christmas Eve, lugging a certain amount of baggage. Our emotional load might be light--- or heavy--- or any place in between. BUT--- Even those with the greatest joy--- find ourselves with a certain amount of sorrow or angst, as we move through the next 24 hours. This truth is inevitable.

The Prophet **Isaiah** addressed this truth about 700 years before Baby Jesus was born in ancient Bethlehem. **Isaiah** was writing from exile, in the Kingdom of Babylon, where the Jews had been living after defeat to the same king and army. They were slowly being absorbed into the Babylonian culture and society. As a result, they were losing their unique identity as a people. As each year and decade passed, they were--- slowly becoming--- less Jewish--- and more Babylonian. It was a slow drift--- and for those who remained faithful--- it seemed as if the Lord God was quietly slipping away.

Yet, **Isaiah** writes this is not the case--- God was not departing! If anything, the minds and hearts of believers was fading. The Prophet writes; *“Do not fear....! Do not be discouraged...! For your Maker is your (spouse), the Lord of hosts is his name; the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth...! ...with great compassion (the Lord) ...gather(s) you!”*

We clearly see, that it is the people, even the most faithful believers, who allow the grasp of the Lord God, to slowly relax--- and let go. God's *compassion* and

willingness to *gather* the people of faith--- never fades! The Lord remains steadfastly present!

In so many different ways, the Jewish time of exile, eventually ushered in a revival of faith. It changed the focus of the Jewish faith from the Temple in Jerusalem to the local synagogue. The Temple served the masses--- where there was no fellowship and little interaction with the Temple Priests and leaders. The synagogue, on the other hand, served a small number of Jewish families living in the same area. This emphasis allowed for more time to study the scriptures, and just as importantly--- to fellowship and work together for the common good of their community--- or family of faith. Within the framework of the Jewish exile, the concept of a local church was born!

The closing verse in this lesson from *Isaiah*, assures us of how God's presence is certain, and that the Lord will never depart the people of faith. The Prophet writes; *"For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall (never) depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, (promises) the Lord, who has compassion on you."* The promise given here is this: the forces of nature nor man--- will never deter God!

That's quite the promise, isn't it? Mountains may fall, oceans may rise, yet the Lord God remains! Nations may crumble, despots may persecute, yet our Savior will always be with us! This is the truth which we celebrate this and every Christmas. God's everlasting gift--- given to us long ago in a cold and lonely manger stall in Bethlehem--- is still present--- still surrounding us and residing within each of our hearts. The Lord has never departed. Christ Jesus will never leave us. Our God is the Lord of truth and promise, and the promise remains still---

*Because Angels watched...
Shepherds sought...
Wise Men traveled...
and all rejoiced that Christ our Lord---
our New Born King, both then and tonight---
was, is, and will continue to be, God's Gift---
saving us from our sin! Amen.*

Preached by;

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