

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 8, 2010 (Proper 14, Year C)

You've probably seen those small red, white, and blue signs that read "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You." We have one out front and you can see them all over the country. They're particularly helpful for churches that are tucked away down side streets rather than prominently displayed on Main Street. Sometimes they have informative directional arrows telling you that St. Swithin's is exactly .3 miles down the road. Of course it's only truly authentic if the black metal pole is covered in ivy and the sign is faded with two rust lines running down from the metal hooks. I find them comforting whenever I spot one while I'm on vacation – I know there will be something familiar waiting for me on Sunday morning. And they've been around for years – at least since the 1950s.

What makes me cringe, however, is when the actual welcome is not consistent with the sign. The Episcopal Church welcomes you *if* you can find the front door; *if* you don't mind a grumpy usher (not that we have those here); *if* you're familiar with the juggling of multiple books and the up and down of pew aerobics; *if* you look and act like us; *if* you speak our vocabulary – one that includes words like narthex and chancel and Upper Weld Hall; and *if* you can find coffee hour which just happens to take place in the aforementioned Upper Weld Hall.

When the words don't match the welcome this is false advertising. And there's nothing more disappointing than false advertising whether you're a consumer or a churchgoer. When the reality doesn't meet the promise you feel duped. If a diet drink makes you gain weight or a church that claims to be welcoming doesn't live up to its promise you probably won't buy that drink again or attend that church on another Sunday morning.

In our Old Testament reading Abraham is claiming that God is not living up to his promises; he's annoyed that God is not fulfilling his end of the bargain. Abraham promised to worship God exclusively and God promised Abraham several things: land, that his family would become a great nation, and that the whole clan would be blessed. And none of this had yet come to pass – Isaac hasn't been born to Sarah. In fact at the moment, Abraham's heir is a slave named Eliezer of Damascus; a man who ends up as a Scriptural footnote of Biblical proportions. But at this moment I'd imagine Abraham feels deceived; as if God has been engaged in false advertising.

In a sense this is a common complaint against God. We've all had this experience in our prayer lives; moments when Jesus' line about prayer doesn't ring true: "If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." 'Oh really? What about that time I asked you to heal my Aunt Helen and she died anyway? Not to mention wiping out my credit card debt – that Visa bill is alive, well, and gaining interest. That's false advertising, Jesus.' And in moments of grief or anger even awareness of the fact that God's time table differs from the human agenda doesn't help much. It feels like false advertising and even the most devout among us can't help but question our faith.

So what does God do after Abraham lodges his complaint? God makes another promise. Abraham is taken outside and challenged to count all the stars. Why? Because God tells him that his descendants will be more numerous than the stars of the sky. And we hear that “Abraham believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Faith, trust, belief. Once Abraham’s faith was kindled, God acted.

The promises of Jesus are not false advertising. There *is* a there there even if it is sometimes barely perceptible to the naked human eye. The promises of salvation and the forgiveness of sin are real; as real as the brokenness of the human condition. Our own assumptions or our own desires are sometimes false but not the bedrock promise of faith – that Jesus will be present with us even to the end of the age.

But it takes trust and the hard work of faith on our part. In our gospel reading we get three seemingly disconnected statements from Jesus this morning. And Luke probably cobbled them together from Jesus’ teachings and wrote them down. But they could all be said to involve trusting in the promises of Jesus. If you believe, greater things than these will occur.

After telling the disciples to give away all their possessions, Jesus then tells them to be ready. For Luke’s original hearers and for us, these are references to the Second Coming when Jesus will come again in great glory to judge the world. And, again, the notion, of false advertising can’t help but enter our minds. It’s been over two thousand years and while Jesus tells us to be awake and ready and alert, it’s hard not to be lulled into a false sense of security. How vigilant must we really be? Can’t I just take a nap for awhile? Maybe take a sabbatical from church until this all gets sorted out? Jesus promises to return but it hasn’t happened yet and it’s been a *long* time. It’s understandable if we let our guard down and become apathetic in our religious devotion and observance. But that’s not where relationship with God resides. If we are attentive to our relationship with the risen Christ in the here and now then all of the promises are realized. The in-breaking of the Kingdom of God occurs right here on earth; not magically but through the continued discipline of prayer and worship.

A few years ago someone in the Communications Department of the national Episcopal Church decided the classic “The Episcopal Church Welcomes You” sign needed updating. So they changed the slogan to read “We’re Here For You.” Which, to me, sounded more like the tagline for an insurance company than anything else. And that campaign went over about as well as New Coke; soon enough we were back to the familiar wording. I do hope the church is here for you and that you are welcomed. The ministry of hospitality in Christ’s name is an important part of our mission in the community. But I also hope we’re not engaging in false advertising. Think about this the next time you see someone you don’t recognize. Welcoming isn’t just a clergy or staff responsibility; it’s incumbent upon all of us. We can’t always match the divine truth in advertising but we can at least strive to do so in this place.