

Great Challenges for Great Churches
“The Great Assurance”
Matthew 28:16-20

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In a Tom Wilson cartoon, Ziggy is leaving the IRS office and as Ziggy steps through the door, the auditor says to Ziggy, “Remember, we will always be here for you.” Always. ‘Always’ is such a rare and wonderful word that it almost sounds good even when it comes from the IRS. Always.

The dictionary says ‘always’ is every time, all the time, continually, forever, unceasing, invariably, perpetually. Always.

On His way out of this world, the risen Christ made a promise that will anchor your world. And here is what He said, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” It is here where I want to land. It is a promise that will make you secure whatever the circumstances of your life may be. “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Somebody said that the problem with life is that it has an ‘if’ right in the middle of it. Indeed it does. You do not live very long in this world until you run into the ‘ifs’ of life.

Success is a moving target. Once upon a time, people got an education, found a good company to connect with, and lived happily ever after. Those days are gone. Businesses no longer exist to last. They are built to yield something of value and once that is completed, they will vanish off the scene. I was delighted to know that this congregation has a career transition ministry. It has been

a valuable part, and will continue to be a valuable part of the ministry here.

An article in Fortune Magazine opens like this, "Larry Ellison is a very lucky guy. He has more money than anyone except Bill Gates. He is the CEO of the most powerful software company in the world besides Microsoft." What's so bad about that? For Ellison, everything. Because somebody else is ahead. Success is a moving target. Or, as the country song says, "Every time I make my mark somebody always paints the wall." Isn't that the way it is in the real world?

Last August, I went out to the PGA tournament at Valhalla Golf Course in Louisville, Kentucky. I made a point to be there on Friday afternoon. I wanted to see Tiger Woods and Jack Nicholas play golf together in Jack Nicholas' swan song. What an afternoon. What a history. I wanted to see the golden bear of the past yield his fame to the golden boy of the present. He did it with such grace and dignity. I walked off that golf course thinking no job, no wealth, no fame, no celebrity lasts forever. Life has an 'if' right in the middle of it.

People have feet of clay, have you noticed that? We long to be dependable, reliable, responsible and trustworthy sort of folk but lots of times we make promises we just cannot live up to.

I had my first wedding at Brentwood Church last night. I love to do weddings. I don't have to pay for them and I don't have to plan them. I just have to show up. Weddings are such pure events. Everything seems to be so perfect and powerful at weddings, yet the fact still remains that promises made are not always promises kept. Half of those that promise to love and cherish each other for a lifetime at the altar, will see those vows

dissolved in divorce court.

Veronica Shofstall wrote a little piece some years ago called, "*After While*." It goes something like this:

"After a while you learn the subtle difference between holding a hand and chaining a soul. And you learn that love doesn't always mean leaning, and company doesn't always mean security. And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts, and presents aren't promises.

After a while you begin to accept your defeats, with your head up and your eyes open, with the grace of a woman not the grief of a child. And you learn to build all your roads on today, because tomorrow's ground is too uncertain for plans. And the future has a way of falling down in mid-flight.

After a while you learn that even the sunshine burns if you get too much. So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul, instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers. And you learn that you really can endure, that you are strong and you really do have worth, and you learn, with every good-bye, you learn."

Happy is the day when you stop worshipping people and start worshipping God. Life has an 'if' right in the middle of it.

Time and tide wait for nobody. The town of Le Lavandou on the French Riviera, passed a law barring any more burials in the town cemetery. It was full. The law that they passed went something like this: "It is forbidden, without a cemetery plot, to die on the territory of this commune."

The law against dying however, has not worked. Nineteen people have already died since the council passed that law so they are housed temporarily in the vaults of their friends until they can find their final resting place. Life is iffy.

When life gets real shaky, I go to the country and sit out under the stars. I want to get hold of something permanent. I look at the heavens and I behold the beauty that God has created above us and around us and among us; the moon and the stars that God has set in place. Even as I sit there, I see a streak of light and I am called to remember that even the stars have a life span. The stars shine over the mountains, the stars shine over the seas. The stars look up to a mighty God. The stars look down on me. The stars will last for a million years, a million years and a day. But God and I will live and love when the stars have passed away.

And here is the point of the sermon. Just three words. God is always. You can anchor your soul on that eternal truth. "Lo, I am with you always." From everlasting to everlasting. God is God. You can trust in God and not be afraid. You can lean on Jesus and not be abandoned. God is over all things, and under all things, and around all things. There is never a burden that He does not carry. There is never a joy that He does not share. Jesus is always there.

Irving Berlin, wrote a famous love song a number of years ago. My wife reminded me that we sang it at our wedding. It has been too long for me to remember that. But if I could paraphrase his great love song, I would want to say it like this, "God is loving you always, with a love that's true, always. When the things you've planned, need a helping hand, God will understand, always. Days may not be fair, always. That's when God is there, always. Not for

just a day, not for just an hour, not for just a year, but always.”

“Lo, I am with you always.” It’s a promise you can live with. It is a *comforting* assurance. Remember the setting in which this statement is made. It comes on the eve of Jesus’ ascension. He is out of there. He is ready to place the Kingdom of God into the hands of these eleven shaky men: Thomas, full of doubt; Peter, fresh from denial; James and John still jockeying for position, more interested in competition than communion; and Phillip and Nathaniel who just want to go home and forget about this whole deal! And there He says to them, “I want you to make disciples of all nations.” A gigantic commission that we will talk about next Sunday morning. And in their shaky hands as they reel in the possibilities of it, He makes this simple promise, “Lo, I will be with you always.” It makes everything possible you know.

The world wants to know what you do and what you have. But God is more interested in who you are. And do not forget that you are a child of God. No less than the moon and the stars, you have a right to be in this place. He puts you together in the depths of the earth. He knitted you together in your mother’s womb. He has a plan, and a purpose, and a design, and a dream for your life. When you go through the waters, He will go with you and when you are thrown into some furnace heated seven times hotter than usual in the pressures of life, He will not desert you there. Lo, you are a child of God. “I am with you always.” What a *comforting* presence.

What a *converting* presence – you can’t be with God always in the person of Jesus Christ and stay the same. It is a converting presence. Steve Sjogren’s book, “*Conspiracy of Kindness*” tells the true story about Joe Delaney and his 8 year old son, Jared. The two were

playing catch in the backyard when Jared said to his dad, "Dad, is there a God?" Joe shook for a few minutes and said, "I really don't know about things like that. I don't know." Jared dropped his glove and went inside and got a balloon that he had brought home from the circus a couple of days before and a pen and a piece of paper and he came back out. He sat down and wrote a note on the paper that said this, "God if you are real and if you are there, would you send somebody to tell Dad and me about it?" He tied it to the balloon and sent it off. Two days later, Joe and Jared stopped by a car wash in the community. When the car was washed, Joe went to pay for it and he suddenly discovered that it was a church group that had washed his car. Steve Sjorgen's church. And Steve said to Joe, "It's free. We are doing this because God loves you and we love you and we are just glad to do it. We want to share it with you." And Jared, the 8 year old said, "Are you one of those real Christians?" And so, there opened an opportunity to create a conversation and a relationship. The end of which Joe and Jared became Christian people. Be careful what you pray for, you might get it. "Lo, I am with you always." That is a converting assurance. "Happy are those that hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be satisfied." When the things you plan need a helping hand, God will understand, always.

A *continuing* presence. A *comforting* presence, a *converting* presence, and a *continuing* presence. Two or three years ago, I made a flippant statement in a sermon, "Life is not fair, get over it." I thought it was kind of cute. That night at midnight, I held two parents in my arms at the University Hospital in downtown Louisville who were trying to assimilate the terrible shock that their 16 year old daughter had been killed in an automobile accident. As I had my arms around them and sat there waiting and holding them, no words could suffice. That mommy

looked me in my eyes and said, "Howard, I know you said life is not fair, but I can't get over it." Of course, she could not get over it. You never get over a loss of a child.

But, as I watched them struggle to get a hold of life itself, to not give in to despair, I watched a community of faith take them up in their arms and I watched neighbors surround them and support them and care for them and nurture them. I saw one by one, one day little rays of hope come through until today. They still struggle with all the pain, but they know deep in their hearts that they will not give in to despair. They must go on and live. "Lo, I am with you always." Always. Days may not be fair, always. That's when God is there. Always. Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always.

Martin Luther, that great Protestant reformer, fought with depression almost all of his life. One time during a long bout with it, Luther's wife came down the stairs all dressed in black. Luther said to his wife, "Who died?" "God has." said Mrs. Luther. "God hasn't died," said the great reformer. "Well," retorted his wife, "start living and acting like it!"

The eternal God is the dwelling place underneath the everlasting arms. I love that word. *Always*. "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Lo, remember, pay attention, don't miss it. "I am with you always, even to the end of the world."

Amen.