

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Many years ago, my wife Gale gave me a wheelbarrow for Father's day. She, bless her heart, knew that being a father, and a homeowner, had caused many burdens for me, and that one who loves me ought to give me a gift which made my burdens lighter and my yoke easier. It was a symbolic but very useful gift. The year before, she had given me an ironing board for father's day. The wheelbarrow has had many years now of faithful use; the ironing board not so much. But, when you think about it, a wheelbarrow is a pretty simple concept: it has a container with handles big enough to hold more than you could otherwise lift, and a wheel which supports the weight and can move it along to some destination you have chosen. I suspect it was invented long before records were kept, but I'm sure that the first person to put these two things together, a container and a wheel, was inspired by God, don't you? Now, you may be thinking that I'm getting ready to create a metaphor here, and you wouldn't be wrong. But, I'm not quite there yet, so please bear with me.

So, this new wheelbarrow of mine was a true help to me in the yard that spring, and in the fall, too, of course. And when winter came, I made room for it in the garage assuming that it would reliably help me again soon enough. But, alas, when the spring came and I really needed it, it had a flat tire. Had I done something wrong? I wondered. Had I neglected to care for my inspired gift in some way? Had I committed some sin of omission? Thanks be to God for second chances, my neighbor Dan had a compressor, which was also an inspiring gift, which was able to re-inflate the tire, to refill that thing which had become useless with a new breath of life. Sure sounds like a metaphor, right? But wait for it... Problem was, that poor tire went flat every winter for some reason, and each spring I would depend on Dan's neighborliness to get it going again. Until finally, I went to the hardware store up the street, where all the desperate faithful bring their problems looking for help and guidance. And there I found a surprising mystery: for a few dollars more, by paying a slightly higher cost, one could have a permanently inflated wheelbarrow tire, which was guaranteed not to lose its pneuma, its ruach, its breath of life. And it changed my life.

Yes, the simple image of a wheel always makes a good metaphor. We can set aside reality briefly and explore the symbolic world of the wheel, and maybe deepen our understanding of the real world. There's a lot in that metaphoric world. I mean, there are wheels which help us go places, there are brakes to prevent accidental mistakes, there are flat tires and tires re-inflated by the Spirit, there are snow tires for especially difficult travel during the cold seasons of our lives, there are spare tires, there are whitewalls if we want to be real fancy, and each can reveal something about ourselves and our real world when the rubber meets the road. So, with Christmas only seven weeks away, I've wondered what I might give you as a seasonal gift this year, and I've decided that it is this metaphor...a gift which keeps on giving. I'll be using it frequently this season. You'll probably get "tired" of it, pun intended. But, I do need to expand beyond wheelbarrow tires, as useful as they are, to other types of wheels, keeping in mind first what they all have in common. All have an outer rim, which turns and engages the road we are on during our life's journey. All have a hub, which is the center from which all motion, all energy, begins. And all have some framework which connects the hub to the rim, some doctrine or institutional structure which supports the ability to move ahead.

For Joshua and the Israelites at this crossroads we have read about, the rim of their wheel has entered the Promised Land, and is set upon a journey of discovery and new life. This scripture reading is from Joshua's farewell address, for he is about to pass away and leave his kinfolk to continue the journey on their own. But he wants them to know that the hub of their religious wheel seems to be the historical covenant, traced back to Abraham, that this land will be theirs to possess

and care for. The energy in their moving ahead is derived from that relationship with God. But to properly use that energy, they must choose to engage the transmission and connect with God's promise, and so Joshua, their leader now for so many years, challenges them to renew their intentions, and to remember just how the hub is connected to their daily lives. Reaching out to the rim are spokes, like on a bicycle or motorcycle wheel. Some of these spokes are historical events, like the liberation from Egypt, or the sons of Jacob, or the defeat of Jericho. Other spokes are the commandments, the teachings, given by God through Moses at Mt. Sinai. When those spokes are kept well-adjusted and regulated, their wheel will work well. If not, their forward movement will come to a screeching and consequential halt.

Our Christian religious wheel also has a hub. It is called the Incarnation. The Incarnation of Christ. Our faith is energized by centering on Christ, the Word Incarnate, by the belief in our hearts that God so loved the world that God gave us this Christmas gift, that to demonstrate unconditional love to humankind, God gave the gift which gives on giving. That is the hub of our metaphorical wheel. I am giving you this metaphor, and I'm excited to do it, but God has given us Jesus in real time, in the real world, to be the real thing for which the church has for centuries now sought to provide a comprehensible image. "When we Christians gather, members of one Body, let there be in us no discord but one spirit. Banished now be anger, strife and every quarrel. Christ, our God, be always present here among us. God is love and where true love is, God indeed is there." The Incarnation is the true meaning of Christmas. I am hoping this wheel metaphor will be as useful to you as that old wheelbarrow has been for me, and I'm not just trying to jump the gun by giving it to you early. I'm not trying to outdo the Dollar Store, which has seemingly jumped right over Thanksgiving and moved right on to Christmas retail. Fact is, we Episcopalians often call ourselves "Christmas People", for we acknowledge our hub to indeed be the Incarnation. It is the hub of our faith.

And in-between that hub and our daily journeys, there are spokes. There are the Holy Scriptures, for example, which help support the rim. There are spoke-like statements in the Nicene Creed. There are our prayers, too, and our liturgies. There are the sacraments. There is even the polity of the church, the canons, the vestry and wardens, the priests and deacons and bishops, all meant to help connect the hub, the Incarnation, to our daily lives and thoughts. In the letter to the Thessalonians we heard today, Paul discusses the expected return of Jesus, the "second-coming", which has been a mysterious but faithful supporting spoke to our wheel for centuries. You may find his explanation a bit bizarre, what with trumpets and calling archangels and all, but it is a theme we will address during these weeks before Christmas. And, of course, we do profess that "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again". Jesus himself, in the parable of the ten bridesmaids, reveals something about the Kingdom of Heaven which recommends that we be ready and on the alert for the event. We should wisely be paying attention. We should be keeping our spokes tightened and secure.

What Jesus knew and taught, and what Paul and others discerned, was that the love of God through Christ was always in the process of coming among us. That the power of the Incarnation, at the hub of our metaphoric wheel, carried and transmitted by the strength of these many spokes, would become connected to our lives where the rubber meets the road. The power of the Incarnation is no metaphor, after all. It is the true faithfulness of God, made real in Christ Jesus. Dear Friends, we should keep our tire inflated by receiving the Holy Spirit, and by paying the extra cost of discipleship, that inflation could be permanent, for all intents and purposes. May the breath of life, the Spirit of God, graciously help us live out the gift and promise of the Incarnation. Amen.