

**Stanford Memorial Church  
September 29, 2004**

**CERTAINTY AMID UNCERTAINTY  
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.**

**Psalter: 112**

**New Testament: Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16**

Among the certainties of life is the certainty that life abounds in uncertainty. Uncertainties permeate our individual life, our social relations, our work life, our community life, our national life, and our international life. The sheer velocity of our current technological advances alone outstrips our ability to keep pace intellectually, legally and ethically. Moreover, since 9/11 the specter of international terrorism has accentuated the sense of uncertainty as well. For centuries our world has been destabilized by the pain, destructivity and tragedy of war. But at least the awfulness of war had a sense of beginning, middle and end. We could express appreciation for the peace which had been attained and live in the hope that it would abide for a good while.

Now it appears we will be coping with terrorism as a replacement, or supplement, to war--a destabilizing process that seems to have no beginning, middle or end. We are forced to live with the uncertainty that random violence and destruction may occur at any time and in any part of our global village. Last weekend a woman from Charleston, North Carolina informed me her city undoubtedly would be found near the top of the terrorists' list, because it happened to be the second largest banking center in the country. I was tempted to respond, "No, it had to be San Francisco, with the symbolic destruction of the Golden Gate bridge." Then I thought about the consulting I have been doing with a spiritual care program in Nome, Alaska for the last four years. Though there is a good deal of violence, depression and alcoholism, particularly among the destabilized native population, I do not recall anyone in Nome expressing concern about an attack from international terrorists. Yet for many of the six billion people in our world the threat of terrorism appears to be a clear and present danger. Last week two Russian jets crashed, and immediately a question was raised about a possible terrorist attack. This coming week the city of New York will spend at least 60 million dollars to provide protection for the Republican convention, primarily to prevent a possible terrorist attack.

This universal environment of uncertainty and apprehension has created a hothouse for the propagation of fundamentalism. In his book, *Strong Religion*, Gabriel Almond, a former Stanford professor, defines fundamentalism as "a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled "true believers" attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors" (p. 17). Inspired by a guru or TV personality, the fundamentalists cling to the pseudo certainty that they are the true believers, that they are among the saved and everyone else is damned. Regardless of their label—Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, or Moslem—the essential dynamics remain the same: we have the truth and you do not; we are right and you are wrong. Of

course these fundamentalist groups are mutually exclusive, which leads to the irony that the more they act out of their certainty, the more uncertain our world becomes. As the writer Iris Murdoch observed, “This is an age of demons and amoral angels and all sorts of deep fears. Like the first centuries of the Christian era, it’s an age of extreme solutions” (from *The Message to the Planet*). Thus while the fundamentalists may appeal to a religious founder—whether it is Buddha, Jesus, Moses or Mohammad—and assume a related period of certainty and stability, in point of fact each of these leaders lived in a time of great uncertainty, upheaval and apprehension.

Our lesson today from the Book of Hebrews—written in “the first centuries of the Christian era,” mentioned by Iris Murdoch—provides a glimpse of the struggle to find certainty amid uncertainty. Like so many letters of the New Testament, Hebrews devotes considerable attention to the question of how to attain certainty in a very uncertain time. The basic guideline, in all situations, is to “Let mutual love continue” (13.1). Hospitality should be extended to strangers, “for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13.2b). People in prison, many of whom are being tortured, should be remembered, since they probably have been arrested and abused because of their faith. Marriage is to be held in honor. Money should not become an obsession. And leaders should be respected and imitated. But most important, the abiding certainty undergirding and permeating this uncertain flux is the certainty that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today and forever”(13.8) Here is the certainty which provides depth and direction in an uncertain world.

By implication the guidelines provided by the author of Hebrews are important, but they are not certain. Strangers, for example, are not the same yesterday and today and forever. When Hebrews was written strangers pretty much consisted of the Roman conquerors, people from the next village, and some traveling merchants. The cultures of Asia, India and the Americas were virtually unknown. With most of the population living rurally, or in small towns and villages, it was pretty easy to distinguish the neighbor from the stranger. Moreover, everyone knew their place and remained in it. If you were born a slave, you lived and died a slave. If you were a woman, you had no civil rights and your husband essentially determined your fate. It was the spirit of mutual love, derived from the conviction that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever, which contributed, over the centuries, so much to the elimination of slavery, the acceptance of individuals from other nations, and attaining civil rights for women.

Today the stranger has become much more difficult to define. On the one hand, we enjoy immediate email connections to potentially anyone on the face of the earth, creating a global village in which we are all neighbors. On the other hand, we express concern over the continuing waves of immigrants who fail to appreciate our traditions; our closest friends are generally not our neighbors, as in the past, but probably live some miles away; and in our ever-expanding suburban landscape it is hard to tell where one city ends and the other begins. Yet, in the spirit of mutual love advocated by the writer of Hebrews, there is one particular group of strangers that we should make a special effort to get to know. These very important strangers are the mainline participants of the major faiths, such as Buddhist, Muslims, Jews and Hindus. We need to demonstrate by our

words and actions that what we have in common is so much more important than that which separates us, that we recognize and practice the importance of spirituality and mutual love. Unless we are able to do this, we may well find our global village severely damaged, if not destroyed, by the extreme actions of the fundamentalists. Because Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever, we can commit ourselves to achieving this certainty in our current turbulent and uncertain world.

In addition to reaching out and welcoming strangers, the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to “let marriage be held in honor by all” (13.4). But marriage is not the same yesterday and today and forever, and what we think of as marriage today bears little resemblance to the practice of marriage in the first century. At that time marriages were arranged by the parents, and everyone remained in their class: slaves married slaves, the wealthy remained in their class, as the professionals and all the others did the same. The rights of women were virtually nonexistent, and were usually determined by their husbands; and the purpose of marriage was to have children. Non-married women of course were at the bottom of the social ladder. This system experienced a seismic shift with the advent of the renaissance and the rise of individualism. Romeo and Juliet are the most enduring symbol of overthrowing the traditional applecart of marriage. They committed the unforgivable sin of wanting to marry for love, in the face of the enmity which existed between their families. Before long commoners had the notion that they could marry a prince or a princess. As the generations passed the rights of women began to evolve as well, so that today we readily recognize the right of a woman to leave an abusive marriage—without censure or a sense of shame. Once marriage was permitted on the basis of mutual love and attraction, and couples did not have to have children, it was inevitable that we should come to our current debate over gay and lesbian marriages. This is the updated version of Romeo and Juliet: two individuals—now of the same sex—are drawn to one another out of a mutual sense of mutual love and attraction. Unlike Jesus, marriage is not the same yesterday and today and forever; and, I suspect, most of us would say “thank goodness,” since we know that the first century model of arranged marriages devoid of any rights for women is not terribly attractive.

In addition to welcoming strangers and honoring marriage, the writer of Hebrews also encouraged his readers “to remember your leaders” (13.7). Over the centuries the relations between religion and government has assumed a variety of forms. Generally speaking, religion has always held a position at or very near the top of the political pyramid. In the early years of our history the Egyptian model tended to be the norm: the pharaoh, or king, or chief, was simply declared to be divine. His—and almost invariably it was a he—word was law. You could hardly have more certainty than that. By the time of Hebrews in the first century the cultural landscape had become more complex. It was now evident there was no single faith, but many. This made it a bit more difficult for kings and emperors to claim their divine status. The hierarchy of power tended to be fairly clear, with men occupying all the seats at the top. Over the centuries the stresses and strains within the hierarchical model became more apparent. First the nobles began to demand more voice and positions of leadership. Then came the business and professional classes. Then a good many citizens threw boxes of tea overboard in Boston harbor, declaring they were not going to pay any tax on the tea if they had no

representation in parliament. Women achieved voice and vote, so that today we can take pride in the fact that California is represented by two women who are two of the most outstanding leaders in the United States Senate. Moreover, when we think about all the various forms of government that have evolved over the ages, as well as those which exist today, I suspect most of us would concur with Winston Churchill's pithy comment, "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried." But it is ever a work in progress, never to be taken for granted. Hence when someone declares it is unpatriotic to question the government's policies and actions, we know in our heart of hearts that no government is above question, because no government is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Only Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. The faith of yesterday is that assertion and assurance that this global village belongs to God, that God's creation is ongoing, bringing us meaning and direction in the midst of uncertainty. Such is the great irony of uncertainty. While uncertainties often appear threatening and dislocating, they are also, as we have seen over the centuries, the very material out of which emerge new and better certainties. This is the faith of today, continually trying to put into practice the admonition of Hebrews, "Let mutual love continue." Let mutual love continue as we try to resolve the horrendous complications derived from our invasion of Iraq. Let mutual love continue as we seek to reduce pain and suffering and homelessness, forever seeking to make this world a better place. For the faith of "forever" is the strong hope that God's purposes will be worked out and prevail. So let us go forth in the spirit of mutual love, seeking to identify and affirm new and better certainties amid the uncertainties in which we live, forever sustained and strengthened by the ultimate certainty, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Amen.