

## ***THE CHURCH ENDURING***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

October 20, 2019; Non-lectionary sermon

Psalm 71:1-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5, 11-12

***“Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God  
for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions  
and the afflictions that you are enduring.”***

2 Thessalonians 1:4

There’s a famous line from the French novelist, Marcel Proust: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

It’s a fitting motto for any travelers who leave their home not just to go lie on a beach somewhere, or marvel at the glories of nature, but to meet others and experience how they live.

That’s what Claire and I were about for nearly two weeks, from late September to early October. We traveled to a faraway land: the country of Armenia. For us, Proust’s comment rings true: for we have returned from that distant land with new eyes.

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It was a spiritual journey: a mission/study tour organized by our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Specifically, we traveled with Eliza Minasyan, a native of Armenia who directs the Jinishian Memorial Program.

That program was established 50 years ago by a bequest from Vartan Jinishian, an Armenian immigrant who'd made a lot of money here in his adopted country: first, selling oriental rugs and antiques; and, later, New York City real estate. He made the gift in memory of his parents; his father had been a Protestant minister working among ethnic Armenians in Iran.

The purpose of Mr. Jinishian's bequest of \$30 million dollars — invested with the Presbyterian Foundation — was to produce interest income that could be used to aid the Armenian people.

The Jinishian Memorial Program has done just that, ever since — first in Syria, Lebanon and Israel — where there are sizeable communities of Armenian expatriates — and more recently, in Armenia itself.

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Not everyone knows where Armenia is, so let me tell you. It's a small, landlocked nation, roughly the size of the State of Maryland. It's located just east of Turkey, in the West Asian region known as the Caucasus. It borders not only Turkey, but also Iran, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Just to the north of Georgia, of course, is Russia: the empire that's had an outsized influence on Armenia in the last couple of centuries.

Armenia's one of the oldest nations on earth: but, as a republic, it's one of

the youngest. It was only with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 that the Armenians recovered their independence. That was when the Jinishian program began ministering to Armenians in Armenia, not just the exile communities.

Armenia is also the oldest *Christian* nation on earth. The church in that land traces its roots to Thaddeus and Bartholomew, two of Jesus' disciples. It was in the year 301 AD that the king of Armenia was baptized as a Christian and insisted that his people become Christian too. That was earlier than the famous conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine: Armenia was a Christian nation before Rome was.

And Christian it remains — even though it's surrounded on three sides by Muslim nations: Turkey, Iran and Azerbaijan. A whopping 93% of the population belongs to the national church, the Armenian Apostolic Church. Only 1% of the population is Protestant; an even smaller number is Roman Catholic. The Jinishian Program works with all three groups, operating in three distinctive areas of work: public health, community and business development and what they call “civil education”: teaching the people of this very young republic the ways of democracy.

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We traveled extensively throughout the country. We spent about half our

time learning Armenia's very long — and deeply Christian — history. We visited many ancient churches still being used for worship. The rest of our time, we looked in on various Jinishian-funded mission projects. These included pre-schools, special education programs, an orphanage, agricultural co-ops and business-development programs to foster free enterprise.

One of the most interesting places we visited was a local high school. We gathered in the auditorium to watch a student debate-team competition. Jinishian funds high-school debate clubs all over the country, to train the younger generation in the fundamentals of democracy. This is especially important for this country that was, until recently, under the Communist system, where there was only one political party. It's harder to teach the older generations these skills, but the young people are eager participants in the give-and-take of debate.

As I searched for a scripture verse that captured our impressions of the place and the people, I ended up with 2 Thessalonians 1:4, **“Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.”**

We don't know, exactly, what Paul had in mind as he wrote those words to the Thessalonians, but we do know very well what “persecutions” and “afflictions” Armenian Christians have suffered.

The fact that the Armenian church has survived at all is a testimony to the people's deep faith: and, no doubt, the power of the Holy Spirit amongst them.

They're one of those nations located at the crossroads of many trade routes, surrounded by powerful neighbors. A century before Jesus, they were an empire in their own right, stretching from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean, but ever since those days Armenia has been carved up and dominated by powerful neighbors.

Riding along in our minibus in the north part of the country, I looked out the window and saw four numbers spelled out in rocks on the side of a hill: the way a castaway on a Pacific Island might spell out "SOS" with coconuts. The numbers formed a date: 1915. That was the year the Armenian Genocide began.

It was during World War 1. Turkey — the Ottoman Empire — was one of the Central Powers in that war, allied with Germany. The European nations were preoccupied with trench warfare in Belgium and France, and the Turks took advantage of the opportunity to rid themselves of what they called "the Armenian problem." Millions of Christian Armenians had lived in Turkey, under Ottoman rule, for centuries. The Turks set out to exterminate them all — men, women and children — in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing. As many as 1.5 million Armenians were killed; hundreds of thousands were able to escape, and made their

way to the area that's present-day Armenia, and even to North America. To this day, the population of the Armenian diaspora — Armenians living abroad — is larger than Armenia itself.

We saw photographs from those days at the Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan: images of horror that strongly resemble the pictures we've all seen of the Nazi Holocaust. There are some who think Hitler's "Final Solution" was modeled on the Armenian Genocide; Hitler figured that because the Turks got away with it, maybe he could, too. To this day, the Turks deny their government did it; the official line is that all those dead Armenians were a regrettable casualty of war. So bitter is this memory that the border between Turkey and Armenia is now closed, with no one allowed to cross, and no trade taking place between them.

The present-day nation of Armenia at that time was part of the Russian empire. When the Communists took over in that land in 1917, Armenia became Communist, too: one of the so-called Soviet republics (though it was anything but a republic). For seventy years Armenia suffered under Communism.

Towards the end of that time, in 1988, the northern part of the country was hit by a devastating earthquake: tens of thousands of people died when the cheap, Soviet-era high rise apartment buildings collapsed upon them.

Less than three years after the physical earthquake, there was a political

one: the breakup of the Soviet Union. Armenia finally achieved its independence, but only after the Russians looted the country of most of its factories, shipping the machinery off to the north.

Then came a period when the nation — still reeling from the earthquake — came under the rule of oligarchs: former Soviet functionaries who continued the looting of the economy. As if that weren't bad enough, there was at the same time a terrible four-year war with the neighboring nation of Azerbaijan. There's never been a peace treaty to end that war; only a cease-fire. The border between the two countries is closed. That means that, with the Turkish border also closed, the only open borders Armenia has are with Iran to the south and Georgia to the north.

But now, surprisingly, there's hope: because, just two years ago, the Armenian people rose up at the ballot box and voted the oligarchs out. They called it the "Velvet Revolution," because it was largely peaceful. It was largely driven by young people, who came out in large numbers to protest. Today there's tremendous optimism among the people that their worst days are now behind them.

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That's a long and complicated — and very painful — history. With all they've been through, you'd think the Armenians would be the most down-in-the-

mouth, bedraggled people on earth. But the truth is just the opposite.

“The church is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer,” said the ancient church father Irenaeus. He could just as well have been speaking of the Armenian church. We visited a great many very ancient churches, but each one was still open, still being used as it’s been used for centuries. People of all ages came in and out, to pray and light candles. In the church in Etchmiadzin — the Vatican of the Armenian Apostolic Church — we attended a portion of a Sunday worship service that was absolutely packed. The deacons sang the ancient liturgy. The choir of mostly women — white shawls covering their hair — looked for all the world like what you’d imagine the women of one of Paul’s churches would have looked like.

Like the other Eastern Orthodox churches, the liturgy of the Armenian church is absolutely unchanging. If you could travel back in time 500 years — and even longer — you’d have a very similar experience. With all the changes and struggles the Armenian people have been through, they draw strength from the fact that their worship does not change. No matter what the Turks or the Russians or anyone else may do to them, the church is always there for them: a tower of strength and a center of national identity.

“Steadfastness and faith” are the two words Paul says about the

Thessalonian Christians. They underwent their own hard times: and survived. The Greek word translated “steadfastness” is elsewhere translated “endurance.” These are people who, spiritually speaking, are like marathon runners. They know they’re in it for the long haul — the *very* long haul.

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Which makes for an interesting contrast with the church here in the United States. We have known nothing of genocide, thank God. Nothing of living under a godless Communist system that tried its best to shut us down. Nothing of recent wars with our neighbors, Canada or Mexico (can you imagine?). Nothing of an earthquake that flattened so many buildings, over such a large portion of our country.

There are some Christians in this country who claim they’re persecuted by our secular government, but believe me, from the stories I heard in Armenia, most things Christians here grumble about are no more than minor inconveniences.

Maybe you caught the news item this past week about some recent research by the Pew Charitable Trusts about the vitality of American Christian churches. They found that only 65% of American adults now describe themselves as Christian. That’s down from 77% in 2009, just ten years ago. Meanwhile, the portion of the population that describes their religious identity as atheist, agnostic

or “nothing in particular,” now stands at 26%: that’s up from 17% just ten years ago.<sup>1</sup>

A deep dive into the statistics reveals that these changes are largely being driven by the younger generations. The Millennials and younger are rejecting Christian faith in far, far greater numbers than their parents ever did at that age.

No, it’s not just a Lamington problem. Nor is it a Presbyterian problem, nor even a mainline Protestant problem. Every Christian denomination in the U.S.A. — the Roman Catholics as well as every flavor of Protestant, from liberal to conservative — is facing the same generational challenges.

“Woe is me!” you may be inclined to say: or maybe “Woe is us!” But the problem’s a lot bigger than us: be it congregation or even denomination. The churches of America have had it pretty easy, in this land where we enjoy so much prosperity and so many freedoms. Maybe too easy. Steel sharpens steel, as they say, and without anything hard and unyielding to rub up against, our edge has grown dull. If the Armenian church experience shows us anything, it’s that, very often, when the church of Jesus Christ has the most to endure — even when it has to fight for its very life — is when it grows the strongest.

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<sup>1</sup>David Crary, “Share of Americans With No Religious Affiliation Is Rising Significantly, New Data Shows,” *TIME*, October 17, 2019.  
<https://time.com/5704040/american-religious-affiliations-decreasing/>

That’s the literal meaning of the word “endure,” you know. Our English word comes from the Latin *indurare*, which means “to harden.” Tough times make us tough, resilient, determined to go forward, come what may. But if we allow our faith to degenerate into a lifestyle option, a mere choice of one leisure activity among others, then God help us. I mean that literally: *God help us*, because nothing else can.

It’s as C.S. Lewis said, many years ago: “Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.”<sup>2</sup>

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So many of us have, over the course of years, let our Christianity drift into the realm of the moderately important. Is it any wonder so many younger people look at the faith of their parents and grandparents and respond with a resounding “Meh”?

Christ belongs at the very center of our lives, not somewhere off to one side. If he’s going to reign in our hearts, we need to invite him in — or back in, as the case may be. And if it takes the story of Christians from other parts of the world to inspire us to do so, then so be it!

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<sup>2</sup>“Christian Apologetics” from *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*.

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