



Where PEACE and LOVE and HOPE abide

BY W. BRUCE BENSON

*Where peace and love and hope abide...
... they truly do abide:*

*This abiding, though, is not a bard and stubborn stone,
Unmoved, unmarked, existing for itself alone,
but like the fragrant breath of life,
or Incarnation's beating heart,
a dove in flight, a river flowing through the night,
or waves and particles of light from stars in space,
not timeless but time-full — a song or carol, sung.
Peace and love and hope abide
As melodies of grace.*

WHEN I WROTE THOSE WORDS FOR THE 2007 Christmas Festival program, I knew the theme — *Where peace and love and hope abide* — and I knew most of the music that would be featured. I had seen sketches of the set design Judy Swanson and her family were constructing for Skoglund Auditorium. I also knew that this was Christmas Festival number 96 at St. Olaf.

I couldn't help but consider how the St. Olaf Christmas Festival itself abides, year after year, decade after decade. It abides even though all the people who started it are gone and have been for some time. Even though it is held in a gymnasium. Even though it creates additional stress on campus at an already stressful time of the academic year. And even though there is nothing in the college's charter or bylaws mandating its continuance. So does it abide now merely as a habit? Merely as tradition with a small "t"? I don't think so.

It abides because, regardless of the theme, it is always full of peace and love and hope and beauty and truth and excellence and promise and Gospel. And all of us need that. It endures because it retells the enduring story of Immanuel, "God-with-us"; it celebrates an enduring hope, the hope that comes from living in God's love; and it does this through music that endures because the music, too, is full of truth, beauty and Gospel. In that way, it is like the

holy peace and love and hope it praises: it abides in ways that are grasped with the heart, not the hands.

In a way, a college education is aimed at helping one discern what abides and what does not. Are there truths that endure, truths that abide across generations and centuries? Are there other apparent truths that are only temporary, that should be let go? Are some current social values shallow and ephemeral? Are there other values that abide? How do truth, beauty, peace, love, hope, excellence and Gospel abide?

In the gospels of Matthew and Mark there is a story about Jesus with his disciples in the region of Caesarea Philippi, in the northern part of Galilee. As they are walking along, Jesus asks his disciples to tell him who people say he is. They give him an assortment of answers: one of the prophets, John the Baptist returned from the dead. He asks them who *they* say he is. Peter delivers a simple statement of faith, and Jesus responds by saying, "You are Peter (Petros) and on this rock (petra) I will build my church."

Ever since going with St. Olaf students on January Interim classes to visit the ruins of Caesarea Philippi, I have imagined this biblical episode taking place near the religious center of the district — a sheer cliff face with a cave and a spring of water where the god Pan and others were worshiped. I imagine Jesus with a twinkle in his eye standing by the very impressive literal rock smiling as he put his hand not on that rock but on Peter's shoulder saying, "on *this* rock."

What abides in God's world is built with living stones. It really is like music that abides in the singing and playing; if it never gets off the printed page, if it never lives, it never becomes music.

The Spirit of God builds peace and love and hope out of living stones. What abides, what truly abides, abides in and through the Spirit of God. The Word became flesh and lived (abided) among us, full of grace and truth. The Spirit abides with us still. 🙏

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