

The Past Is Prelude

TEXT:
I Chronicles 29:10-18
Psalm 24
I Corinthians 3:9-11

April 6, 2008 – 150th Anniversary of First Presbyterian Church

After several generations in the making and a number of months in the planning, we have arrived at the date to celebrate and give thanks to God for the rich history and ministry of First Presbyterian Church of Lawrence. For all their hard work, I wish to thank the members of our Anniversary Committee, led by Carl Locke, who planned the activities for our celebration this day.

Our anniversary table has been set by visits in the past few months by the Moderator of the General Assembly, the Rev. Joan Gray, as well as Dr. Jack Rogers, a former Moderator, and by Dr. Ted Wardlaw, a future Moderator. And we welcome this morning many special guests, including Joan Messineo, wife of Paul Messineo, and my colleagues in ministry, who responded to God's call to serve this congregation with "energy, intelligence, imagination, and love." St. Paul wrote in *I Corinthians*, "According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it."ⁱ Thus, it is an honor for Phyllis and me to build upon the foundation each of you carefully and faithfully laid to the glory of God. Thank you for your ministry to First Presbyterian Church, and for gracing us with your presence on this special day.

But we are also here this morning to engage in the challenge of dreaming, praying and planning for the future of this congregation. Looking forward into the future, as you no doubt know, has its risks. As one marketing specialist noted, "Those who predict the future must do so frequently."ⁱⁱ One of the pitfalls of predicting what is to come is that if you are wrong, you may look monumentally dumb. For example, let me share with you some of the worst predictions of all time.ⁱⁱⁱ

"Inventions have long since reached their limit, and I see no hope for further developments."
—Roman engineer Julius Sextus Frontinus, A.D. 100

"It doesn't matter what he does, he will never amount to anything." —Albert Einstein's teacher to Einstein's father, 1895

"It would appear we have reached the limits of what it is possible to achieve with computer technology." — computer scientist John von Neumann, 1949

"The Japanese don't make anything the people in the U.S. would want." —Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, 1954

"I predict the internet ... will go spectacularly supernova and in 1996 catastrophically collapse."
—Bob Metcalfe, *InfoWorld*, 1995

So, while I may not wish to predict the future before us, it

does seem to wise to prepare for God's continuing call to ministry in our community.

Chances are you haven't heard too many sermons from *I Chronicles*. It tends to get lost in our Christian Old Testament since much of its material is found in *I and II Kings* and *I and II Samuel*. In fact, the original name for *Chronicles* in the Greek version of the Old Testament was "The Things Omitted."^{iv} Hardly a good omen to be taken seriously.

But in the Hebrew Bible, *I and II Chronicles* took a more prominent place. The *Chronicles* are the final books of the Hebrew Bible and function as a valued summation of the tradition. These books speak extensively about transition and living the traditions of faith in the light of new and changing contexts. As the final chapter of the Jewish Canon, they prepared the people for God's call in a different era.

The *Chronicles* were written several centuries after the events they describe. The Jews had returned from exile in Babylon, and they hear, again, the familiar traditions of their faith. The author has cleaned up some of the rough edges of Israel's history, putting a more perfected, polished perspective on the story. It is like a candidate's surrogates going into the spin room following a political debate and giving the best account – only *Chronicles* has more spirituality than CNN.

In our particular text, we read the final words of King David as the rule of Judah passes on to his son, Solomon. This is the second transition represented in *Chronicles*. David praised God for the rich history of the people and for their current safety, prosperity and community. He reminded his listeners that their life belonged to God. From this core understanding of life everything else flows; our wisdom and our potential, our past and our future. [29:11-12] This is the heritage, the wisdom, David passed on to Solomon. And so he prayed,
“O Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel ... grant to my son Solomon that with single mind he may keep your commandments, your decrees and your statutes.” [29:18-19]

In the final transition of the *Chronicles*, he invites the next generation take the reigns of the future of the tradition. Each generation has the responsibility of building upon the faith handed down by its immediate predecessors. As *The Confession of 1967* reminds us,

In every age, the church has expressed its witness in words and deeds as the need of the time required.^v

The chronicler called his generation (now several generations removed from the time of David and Solomon) to pursue the path to which they, too, were now called.

In much the same way, in the weeks leading up to this celebration, we have noted the manner in which God’s hand had been at work with people who, for 150 years, have populated the pews of this church. Following the call of the Free

Staters who first settled by the gentle bend in the Kansas River, the earliest Presbyterians to our community came as part of an experiment in equality in the Western plains. Building on the Presbyterian ethos of education, they were instrumental in the founding of the University of Kansas. Through the decades, Presbyterians found their gifts and talents used in civic, educational and mission endeavors. Their faithful dedication, worship and stewardship had made this day and our mission possible. And now, with the past as our prelude, we build on their foundation as God continues to give life to the dreams, the faithfulness and the mission planted by the generations before us.

In many ways, our lives as Christians in the year 2008 are like the Jews in the post-exilic era. The Jews of the 4th century were trying to understand how to be faithful in unfamiliar times. In the face of their unsettled era, they drew on their past, gave thanks for their heritage, and they planned for the future.

Our lives today are lived in unfamiliar and unsettled times as well. Religious faith is not the norm today. Indeed, it is more difficult to be a believer than to be a non-believer. More and more of our neighbors are finding rewarding things to do on Sunday morning other than attending church. The fighting within our denominations, and our lack of civility toward one another, drive people away from the church’s doors. The true meaning and heart of religion continues to be abused, inflicting violence, ethnic strife and discrimination throughout our

world. People are turned off from the “words” of the Church.

And so we wrestle with being faithful in these unsettled times: As we dream, plan and pray for God’s future we must continue to engage in the lifeblood of the Christian church. It is in mission, in engaging in the life of Christ on behalf of others, which will continue to build our faithful presence in Lawrence. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, once wrote, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.”^{vi} As we step into God’s unfolding story, we must always bear in mind that we are a church focused beyond our walls; the church does not exist for us, the church exists for others; it is not we who are to be served, we are called to serve.

This is where I think Kennon Callahan’s words in his book, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, are so empowering. An authentic church of Jesus Christ, he writes, becomes a church that is more interested in “helping than being helped, in loving, than being loved, and in giving than in getting.”^{vii} And people, he goes on to point out; will seek out churches who give themselves away.^{vii}

This morning, we unveil our new mission statement, which you can find on front page of the yellow pages of announcements and in the cover logo on our 150th anniversary history book. The statement reads:

We are a community of disciples who celebrate God’s inclusive love by ministering to one another and the world.

It is our hope that this statement will be a fruitful guide as we build on our past and move into our future.

Our city, and hence our church, draws its name from an abolitionist from Massachusetts, Amos Lawrence. However, there is another Lawrence in our deep and rich history, St. Lawrence, the Archdeacon of Rome, who was martyred in the year 258.

During his time the early Christians experienced a great persecution. The Governor arrested the Pope Sextus, demanding all the treasures of the Church. The Pope refused to tell the Governor where the treasures were, and he was tortured to death. Soon the Governor turned his attention to Lawrence.

The Governor threatened Lawrence with the same fate. "Where is the treasure of the Church?" he demanded.

Lawrence responded, "I can not get it for you instantly. But if you give me three days, I will give you the treasure." The Governor agreed.

Three days later, Lawrence returned to the Governor's courtyard followed by a long line of people. The Governor walked out onto his balcony and said, "What is the meaning of this? Where is the treasure of your church?"

Lawrence stepped forward and pointed to the crowd, which was filled with people who were poor, who were disabled, who were the rejects of the Roman society, and he said, "These are the treasures of the Christian Church."

The First Presbyterian Church continues to carry out God's call to be faithful; to be an inclusive community, open to the gifts of

all God's children; to be engaged in the needs and issues of our community, our nation and our world; and to give thanks to the Holy One and to praise the name of our God.

With thanksgiving, let us draw wisdom from the past as we prepare for the future God has prepared for us.

ⁱ I Corinthians 3:10

ⁱⁱ Faith Popcorn, quoted in Leonard Sweet, *Faithquakes*, (Abingdon, 1994), 15.

ⁱⁱⁱ Laura Lee, *The Futurist*, September/October 2000, 20-25

^{iv} Edward Blair, *Abingdon Bible Handbook* (Abingdon, 1975), 121

^v "The Confession of 1967," *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part 1, The Book of Confessions*. 9.02

^{vi} Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 382.

^{vii} Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. (Harper/San Francisco, 1983) 9.

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