

WORDS OF FAITH

1 Kings 8, selected verses, OT p. 311
Mark 8:27-35, NT p. 43

September 20, 2009
25th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Solomon built the first Jerusalem temple for the Lord. Jesus was building a community of his followers. “Come build a church,” the choir sang. God’s people are always building – building on faith.

Solomon’s temple, on a hill near the citadel of Zion, was built of wood and gold and bronze, but it was also built on the promises of God to Solomon’s father, King David. It was built on the Lord’s covenant with Abraham and Moses and the people of Israel. Solomon prayed that God would hear and have mercy any time the people came there to pray.

Jesus led his disciples to Caesarea Philippi and into a time of transition. From this point on, Jesus will confront them with a difficult reality – he won’t survive long in his mission, and they will need to carry on. If they can continue to build their community, if they can support each other and work together, they will discover God’s future – a future of resurrection life.

“Who do people say that I am? Who do you say I am?” Peter’s words of faith, “You are the Messiah,” showed that he understood Jesus at least a little bit. Not enough, not yet, but it was a beginning. Eventually the church would be built on this confession of faith, this rock. “Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ,” Peter stated. We say “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.” Those who confess this faith are brothers and sisters in Christ, and when we meet together, we form a community that is more than a building or a location, even more than the words of faith we say.

As the choir sang,

Come build a church with soul and spirit, come build a church of flesh and bone. We need no tower rising skyward, no house of wood or glass or stone.

Come build a church with human frailty. Come build a church of flesh and blood. Jesus shall be its sure foundation. It shall be built by the hand of God.¹

“It shall be built by the hand of God.” Those are words of faith. We’re not the church because we decided what we believe and then assembled a few folks who could agree with us.

We’re not the church because we found a good spot to build a building. We’re not a church because we enjoy plumbing and mowing the lawn and cleaning and cooking and donating to a group beyond our family. We’re a church because we have been called here by the Spirit of God. We’re a church because here we have found ways to express our thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. We’re a church because together we have learned to trust Jesus Christ to lead us. We’re a “church with human frailty,” that’s for sure, but we do have a firm foundation of faith in Christ – the one who promises to be with us when even two or three are gathered in his name.

Today we’re celebrating the 113th anniversary of Plymouth Church, and its 50th anniversary of becoming Presbyterian. It’s a time to look back at our history. When we celebrated our 100th anniversary in 1996, we published a short history of the church, based on a previous history and some additional records. As most of you know, Plymouth began as a Congregational church. The Rev. Thomas Condon was one of the earliest preachers here, sent as a missionary by the Congregational Church. The church was not yet formally

¹Ken Medema, *Come build a church.* Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 1993.

organized, and other churches were also meeting intermittently, including the Methodists. Sometimes the two groups shared a building, and sometimes they shared a preacher.

We have quite a few historical details, but we don't have much about the faith of the founding members of this church. For fifty years, it was not self-supporting, and yet something kept at least a few people committed to Plymouth. Some years it supported a Christian Education program, and some years found few families attending. Sometimes the preacher was shared with a church in Scappoose or Rainier, and some years there was no regular pastor. People did as many current members do – they put their faith into practice individually in the community, but probably didn't talk much about their faith in Jesus Christ. And yet – there was something, or Someone, who wouldn't let the church die. The One who promises to be with us was here.

I have to believe that the people of 100 years ago, 75 years ago, 50 years ago (and that includes some of you), found God as they worshiped and worked together. They expressed their faith as they sang, “Holy, Holy, Holy!” or “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee.” They were encouraged by Psalm 23 and the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. They celebrated the sacraments of baptism and communion. They were concerned about their children's future. They gave what they could. They made difficult decisions, especially about becoming Presbyterian. They – many of you – worked to hold the church together in a very trying time in the 1980s, and you rebuilt after the fire in Hutchinson Hall. For over 100 years, the members of Plymouth Church have expressed their faith and have lived their faith. We stand in a long tradition of people who didn't give up. They didn't give up on their church. They didn't give up on their future. They didn't give up on God. And God didn't give up on them. That is our history.

An anniversary is also a time to celebrate the present. We have developed a pro-active attitude about our church and its mission. The new welcome committee is one good example. Thirty-some people in teams of five or six per month are responsible for welcoming visitors. Because of your example, I think we're all more aware of visitors and even of one another. That welcome is one way we express our faith, because it reflects the way Christ welcomes us all. We have examined who we are and what our mission seems to be. Our motto is "Open hearts, open minds, in a family of faith." While we're not perfect at that, and it might mean slightly different things to different people, we're working toward that openness to people and openness to new ways to understand and live our faith. Today, we celebrate who we are. We celebrate God's presence among us.

This anniversary is also a time to look to the future. The sabbatical last year produced some thought-provoking discussion in session meetings while I was gone. I wonder if you realize how fruitful that time was for the session and for the congregation as a whole, because of Chuck Falconer's wisdom and love for this church, and his way of getting people to think about the future. Of course, one of the concerns is financial. We have some savings, but the trend in recent years has been to spend a little more than we take in, so we haven't been able to save anything or even give to mission as much as we might like. Your birthday gifts today will help.

Other concerns are building the membership and serving our community. We've talked about outreach activities and decided on a couple that seem possible. Some of you "Fix-Byterians" worked yesterday to help one of our members with yard work. The goal is to expand that beyond our own church. Some of you help at the Community Meals, which has become a real blessing to people in need. Last month we welcomed some new members, and

I look forward to their fresh energy and new ideas. The conversations about our future will continue, as we face new challenges and new opportunities, and as we trust ourselves to the direction of the Spirit of Christ.

One hundred thirteen years. Can you imagine the year 2100? That's only 91 years from now. What will the St. Helens-Scappoose area be like? I can imagine it as a suburb of Portland, maybe with a large high-tech company where a closed mill now stands. I can imagine people will drive mostly electric cars, or maybe they'll be powered by something we haven't dreamed of yet. Or maybe we'll have a MAX line out this way. I'm sure there will still be plenty of bars and schools and grocery stores. And there will be churches. Maybe they won't be quite like the churches we've always known, but I am convinced that people will still come together to hear words of faith. They will still be encouraged by Psalm 23 and the Lord's Prayer. They will support one another in hard times and laugh together in good times. They'll celebrate Baptism and the Lord's Supper. I even think they'll sing "Holy, Holy, Holy!" and "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee." Will there still be a church in St. Helens called Plymouth? None of us will be here then, but what we do today will help to shape that future. Our words of faith, our actions of faith are vital for those who come after us.

On this anniversary, let us commit ourselves once more to the work of Jesus Christ in this place. As we continue to build our community of faith on God's promises, as we support each other and work together, we will discover God's future – the future of resurrection life that Christ promised his disciples. "Come, Lord, and build your church." May that be our prayer. Amen.