**FIRST FOR THE FUTURE: BUILDING ON A FAITHFUL HERITAGE**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
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Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a, 16-17
Mark 13:1-2

In a glorious tapestry in Ghent over one of the altars there is a depiction of the heavenly kingdom. In that tapestry there is an open field and an altar at its center. The animals are gathered about it, the lions and the lambs are lying together, a child is playing over the adders den, the unicorn can be seen in the foreground. It is the Peaceable Kingdom. What cannot be seen is a church building, a temple, any sign of a structure that signifies the place of meeting for God's people. Instead, the sky is the roof, and the earth is the floor of this open air cathedral because all the world has become the heavenly realm.

My friend, George Yu, an architect in Philadelphia, says that this open plan is worrisome. What does it mean? Are there no buildings in heaven or are there no architects in heaven?

The question of church buildings is age old dating back to Biblical days, to the time of David who, having successfully conquered the city of Jerusalem and established himself as king; having built Israel as a military power no longer the pushover of its Middle Eastern neighbors; having ensconced himself in a grand palace… David had time to consider how great was his kingdom and how cushy his situation.

He was comfortable. Life was good, so much going for him, an Obama-esque era underway without the economic troubles. It was Israel's Camelot time, yet something was troubling David.

"It isn't right," he told Nathan his counselor, "that I should have such a beautiful palace as this, with all these lovely Scalamandré fabrics and these André Boulè furnishings and these flashy gold doorknobs, and these beautiful vistas of the city from my balcony, *while God is homeless*. I will build a house for God, a temple in which the ark may reside, a dwelling place for the Holy One of Israel."

At first, Nathan thought it a good idea. But in a dream that night God spoke to Nathan. "Who is David that he should decide that I should need a house? My presence has dwelt in a tent all this long time, since Moses, and should I now need a house?" God asked.

"Tell that upstart David that I will build *him* a house, and that I will establish his name forever. I will be his father, and he will be like a son to me. And *his son* will build me a house."

Of course, in this passage there is a lot of play on the word *house*. David wants to build a temple for God, but God does not need or want a temple. God promises David instead, that he will build him a dynasty, and that David's son, the great Solomon, will be

the one to build the temple; and quite a temple it will be.[1] Built in the ninth century BC, it stood for four hundred years as the great sanctuary of the Temple Mount.

In 587 BC, the Babylonians destroyed it.[2] But in 515 BC Cyrus the Great rebuilt it and 20 years before Jesus, Herod the Great expanded it. Jesus' disciples were impressed by the great stones of Herod's renovations in the passage we read from Mark. "Lord, see what great stones these are," they said. But Jesus, unimpressed by Herod's temple, predicted that even those great stones would fall.

And so they did. In 70 A.D. the temple was destroyed by the Romans. And all that is left now is the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall as it is known, the most holy site in Jerusalem.

I'm not quite so sure why it is that God is averse to temples and buildings and specific locations marked as the place where God is. Maybe it's because God cannot be limited to one place like that. God needs elbow room.

I do know that congregations need a place to meet, because we don't like the cold or the heat or the rain on our face when we are worshipping and serving God. We are only human, and so we build places where God's people can meet, and ministry can be carried out, and God's word can be studied, and God's praises be sung, and prayers can be offered, and children can learn, and we can invite others in to be warmed at the hearth of hospitality.

We need buildings because buildings give us light and heat and a friendly place to gather, a place where the stranger may come in. Someday in heaven the Temple may be outdoors, but here and now we need shelter.

And that is why in 1846 people who had been worshipping down on Wall Street as Presbyterians for 130 years decided to move uptown and build this sanctuary to praise and honor God and give us a place to meet. We meet here, where they put up stones for walls and added light for seeing and heat for gathering when its cold.

At the turn of the 20th Century, the great architects McKim, Mead, and White designed what we now call the South Wing and gave us a chapel and a place where every day 75 or 80 seniors gather for a hot meal and socialization with friends. And on Sunday mornings we study the Bible there.

Fifty one years ago, at the height of the baby boom, the congregation built the Mellin-Macnab Building, calling it the Church House, and planning for a center of life and activity for the growing number of children in the city and the explosion of vitality that churches everywhere, including here, were enjoying.

The Mellin-Macnab Building is the heartbeat and pulse of life here at First Church. Hundreds of people go through its doors every day. The lights go *on* at 5:30 in the morning when the coffee pot starts perking for the homeless men who sleep in the parlor. The lights go *out* when the last group has finished, and the homeless men are in, around 10 o'clock or so every evening.

Three schools use that building. Our own church school teachers and children are in the classrooms right now. Monday through Friday our Nursery School meets there on the fourth floor. And on the third and fifth floors is our unique partnership with the Department of Education of the City of New York providing mainstream education for autistic children from around the city, children of all economic, social and ethnic circumstances.

In the afternoon each day, there is an after-school program for the kids of working parents. All day long and into the night there are Twelve Step groups meeting here, Al-Anon, AA, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous. If you're in the Village, eventually you find your way to First Church.

After we leave every Sunday a group of Ethiopian Christians worship in the Assembly Hall, with their dancing and swaying and singing... you would think you were in Addis Ababa! During the high holy days the congregations of two synagogues gather here and next week a third, the New Shul, will have a congregational dinner.

In the mornings I love to see our receptionist José giving high fives to our three and four year olds arriving for school, and they love to see him and hear him say their name. He knows them all.

The men that sleep in our homeless shelter in the parlor think of it as the Hilton of the shelters, because they are not in some dank basement, but have an above ground view of Fifth Avenue.

That old building is fulfilling the dream John Macnab so eloquently stated for it, "From the outset," he said, "all those involved in the design and construction of the Mellin-Macnab Building were determined that it be a working rather than simply ornamental structure, with as near as possible to a seven-day activity life. I think that by and large, this has and will always be the case."[3]

And it is. Today it is the center of our educational programs, our outreach to the city and especially to the Village, an instrument for mission that has changed the lives and shaped the character of so many people who have been a part of it.

But the old princess of 12th Street is a dowager down at the heels today. With a program and a daily life that demands so much of her, and an ever growing congregation of more and more people; we cannot keep pace with the demands being made on us.

Built in 1958, to much architectural acclaim, the Mellin-Macnab Building features cutting edge technology for 1958! Fifty years later we cannot run the vacuum cleaner and the window air conditioner in my office at the same time without blowing a fuse. The telephone system is out dated and we lose about half the calls we get on a bad day. The classrooms are poorly organized and the space is crowded. There's not enough storage anywhere.

There are 300 children under the age of five in this church, and last year we ran out of classrooms. We have no adequate toddler or crib facilities for the littlest ones in

the church, and no adequate storage for all the strollers that parents bring. Our senior adults need more adequate lighting throughout the building and more accessible space. We need more adult classrooms as well. The offices should be consolidated to facilitate leadership and supervision. The women in the choir should have their own robing room, and the classrooms need wireless technology and computer equipment to make learning interactive.

Our lobby is choked with people after worship, and we need a more gracious space there to allow for free movement and gathering room so that people can have a quiet conversation. We want to develop a youth choir rehearsal area, and we now need a junior and senior high classroom, because (thanks be to God) we have families staying in the city long enough to raise their children into their teenage years.

This is a period in the life of this church that is very much like it was after WW II, with families coming to the city and living near the church and finding a spiritual home here.

With all of this growth in mind, a succession of three committees have studied, planned, prayed, and developed a wonderful design for the future, an architectural approach that will make many important improvements to the Mellin-Macnab Building that are needed now. Several forums for congregational input were held and ideas from those congregational discussions were incorporated into the plan: preservation of the green space on Fifth Avenue, preservation of the parlor and library, provision for an archive for the church's historic documents, the gathering of the church offices in one location, and improvement of facilities for the many groups who use the building from seniors to toddlers.

It's an ambitious plan, the most comprehensive and challenging financial goal the church has ever embraced. $15M to do the renovations and retrofitting that are needed. Today I am thrilled to announce the public phase of this *First for the Future* Campaign. I am especially thankful that the Session and Trustees of the church have adopted this goal and committed themselves to its fulfillment.

And I am overjoyed to say that as of today, because of the dedicated efforts of so many members and the visionary commitment of so many foresighted leaders in the church, we have received pledged commitments of over $10M, of which $2.5M are already in hand. This is the greatest financial goal this church has ever achieved and we can give thanks for what has already been done.

Now the real work begins. We need $5M to complete our goal, and today we turn to the entire congregation to look for commitments to reach it. Soon you will receive a packet of information describing the campaign and what it will accomplish, the programs it will support, and the future that will open to First church as a result of what we will be doing now.

Pledges for this capital campaign will be separate from your annual stewardship pledge. We will ask that you maintain and plan for growth in your annual giving, while

at the same time respond sacrificially to the capital building improvements that are undertaken. The pledges are for a five year period in order to allow for the largest gift possible.

If for instance you were able to commit to $2000 each year for five years, your pledge would be for $10,000 which seems like a lot less when it's only $2000 a year for five years.

Some of you who are older, over 70, may be able to consider a gift through your planned estate, your will, a life insurance policy, or other instrument of funding. Investment income is down these days, we all know that. But our confidence is that over the five years of the campaign there will be recovery in the economy and people will be able to give generously in spite of the fact that these are lean times.

The Session would not ask you to give what you do not have, but only to consider what you do have and give generously, just as those who have gone before us did, to make possible the building that we have today, the Mellin-Macnab Building.

There's every good reason that this is a foolish time to start this kind of project, I know. My own health is in jeopardy, and I will be away for two or three months at the height of the time we are raising funds for this campaign, and that makes the challenge more difficult. But we have a superb Campaign Steering Committee, of Stuart Buice, John Wilmot, and Duane Wall, and they will guide the campaign in the weeks ahead. Besides this project isn't about me anyway, this is something God has given us to do together, because of the blessings God has already poured out so generously upon us and the challenges God has given us to fulfill.

The economy is a strong headwind to fly in. And many people are less able to give than they were a year ago.

But practically speaking, building and material costs are down, and people in the trades are looking for work. If you're able to build, this is a good time to do it. And we aim to take advantage of it.

This past year in the quiet phase of the campaign, members of the church have committed to this campaign, even in a difficult time, because the church means so much to them and because they know that Biblical truth that we all drink from wells we did not dig, and savor wine from vines we did not plant. Those who have gone before us have left us a rich legacy that we enjoy today. We have the opportunity to do for ourselves and for our children what they did for us. It's our turn.

Who has given so far? Our officers have given, our younger members and newer members have been incredibly generous, across all ages. Our long time members have been so supportive. The single largest gift has been $1.5M coming from the youngest sector of the church, the smallest commitment is $250 or $50 each year for five years, and it is sacrificial too.

The average gift has been a little over $72,000. And that represents only 139 pledges so far. In order to reach the goal of $15M we are going to need everyone to make a commitment at whatever level is both sacrificial and certain. We need to be able to count on your gift, so we ask you to make a pledge that you honestly believe you can fulfill, one that is a stretch, perhaps the most generous commitment you have ever made to a cause in which you believe.

In the coming weeks you will be hearing more and more about the campaign. You will be receiving a brochure in the mail explaining the work that will be accomplished and a letter asking you to consider a specific amount. You may be able to give more than that amount, and I hope you will. You may not be able to give anywhere near that amount over five years, and I trust you will only be flattered and not offended by any amount that is requested. None of us knows what another is capable of giving.

I have visited with many people about their commitment these past ten months, and in every case, I am convinced that everyone has given prayerful and thoughtful consideration to their commitment doing all that they possibly can. No one could ask you to do more.

Which brings me back to heaven...

Some day there will be no need for a church, or a temple or a building to house God's work if the visions of the scriptures are true, because the whole earth will be a temple to God's glory.

But in the meantime, our work today is to build on the faithful heritage that has been laid before us, to do in our time what was done for us by those who went before us to strengthen the witness and broaden the outreach of this great old church. The next few weeks for me will have their challenges, but I have already made my commitment. I am committed to be a part of the ongoing witness of this church in the future. And I'm counting on you to be a part of it, too.

*Soli deo Gloria*, to God alone be the glory. Amen

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[1] Solomon, 970-930 BCE.

[2] 587 BCE.

[3] Rev. John O. Macnab, 1989.