

In Every Season: Hope for the Road Ahead

A sermon preached with Dr. David Hughes on 2 Corinthians 3:17-4:1, 7; 1 Corinthians 15:5 by Emily Hull McGee upon the occasion of the church's 150th Anniversary on September 18, 2022 with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

The late preacher Fred Craddock, liked to tell a story of a little boy who was carried on his father's shoulders into a country store. The man behind the counter said to the little boy, "My, aren't you tall today?" And the little boy replied sheepishly, "Well, it isn't all me."¹ The lessons of this past year to remember are clear: *it isn't all us*.

This year we've spent looking back on the ways "it isn't all us" has been a year to remember, hasn't it? We've remembered the witness of Alfred Holland and those first five members of Winston Baptist – perhaps the only Baptists in Winston in 1871. We've remembered the baptism at Belo's Pond, when over a thousand spectators came to see the "curious spectacle" of immersion – which was the first time this church was in the paper, but certainly not the last! We've remembered Henry Brown and George Holland, who, in the spirit of cooperation and mutual love, birthed our sister church, First Baptist on Highland. We've remembered the stories of D. Rich and BF Huntley, whose vision for this building grew out of their stated desire to be faithful to the God whose abundance made it possible. We've remembered the walk from Brown Memorial and the two churches' merger, and fiery prophets who scolded the Finance Committee to get the funds needed for the WMU to host thousands of kids in East Winston for Vacation Bible School. We've remembered that dream staff team that Randall Lolley drew

¹ http://www.stjohnsberkeley.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2013_08_18SuchAGreatCloud.pdf

together – Ron Rice, Fred Kelly, Rod Byard, Marshall Price; Friday night roller skating in the gym, youth choir trips and youth BBQs, mission trips to the Dominican Republic and numerous nonprofits birthed and sustained. We’ve remembered saints like Wava and Mitzi, like Lenwood and Ellen, like Lilly and Daniel. We’ve remembered the rocky patches and deep griefs, the times where we thought our scarcity about it all might take us under.

Yet in every season, First Baptist has felt the presence of God in and through this place. **It’s not all us**, we say with confidence.

II.

It’s not all us, we say again, as we look around us and see a landscape that is ever-shifting, a landscape hardly imagined when Alfred Holland first put that ad in the paper. The urgencies of this season in the life of the church are legion – partisan discord and the fraying of our common fabric, extremism and a growing threat of Christian nationalism, disinterest and trauma among the past faithful, just to name a few. Pair this landscape with the very real issues specific to the American Christian church like decaying buildings, exhaustion from forced pandemic innovation, declining membership and limited financial resources, and what one scholar calls an “imagination deficit disorder,” and we might find ourselves wondering if we too fit into that description and if our best days will be the past days.²

And yet: in every season, we’ve known that it was not all us. In every season, we have been strengthened by the hope of the God who comes close, the God who is always, always making all things new, the God who never stops at the death of Friday because the resurrection of Sunday is at hand.

² Dustin Benac, *Adaptive Church: Collaboration and Community in a Changing World*.

Our church knows that. We've built up muscles of resilience. This is who we are and who we have been. We know that the way ahead won't look like the way behind. We trust that the seasons which have passed will balance with the seasons ahead. We know this and trust this and understand this, because we've lived it! Just a few verses before verse 17 that Annice read for us today is verse 12: "since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness." It was no accident that this verse and its impact steered the work of our Special Committee on Facilities and Mission back in 2017-2018. And it's a verse that gave us the courage to clarify our identity as a congregation who celebrates the fullness of all God's beloved children. Because we do have a hope, we do act! We don't just retreat or lament. We don't bury our heads or wish the past into the future. Since then we have a hope, we say with our very lives, we act with great boldness!

"From first to last," wrote Christian theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, "Christianity is ... hope, forward looking and forward moving." Another theologian, Sam Wells, says this: "community generates hope, because those committed to one another generate momentum and expectation of what God has in store; and hope generates community, since there is nothing more infectious than seeing beautiful things happen over and over again³... the gospel of grace is that God in Christ has, through resurrection, turned the future from terrifying oblivion into everlasting gift."⁴ Hope and community, boldness and action, that which has been and that which will be. In every season, in every complexity, God is indeed among us!

³ Sam Wells, *A Future That's Bigger Than The Past: Catalysing Kingdom Communities*, p48.

⁴ Wells, p142.

You know, I'm encouraged by the truth that the church is at her best when we remember we're a pilgrim people – people on the Way. And the hard truth is that there's never an arrival – on this side of heaven, anyways. We'll never do all the things we want to do: serve all the people and create all the programs and care for each other in all the ways and reach all the new people and innovate all the new ideas. Just as our ancestors didn't look at each other and think of our church, "now, we've made it," we'll not do that either. But as we journey together on the Way, we'll draw strength from the liberation of the exiles before us who journeyed to the promised land. We'll learn from the disciples of Jesus whose understanding of the one they followed happened on the way. We'll be encouraged by the saints who have finished the race ahead of us. We'll remember the words of the beloved hymn, "we are travelers on a journey, fellow pilgrims on the road," and trust that the church – our church – is always a work in progress.⁵

IV.

Friends, we are part of a bigger story. Our church is part of a deeper truth. It's not all us! For God is inviting us into the seasons ahead with hope and great boldness.

Fifty, 100 years from now, our church will again look through the proverbial photo album. They'll wonder about these old stories and what the past means for the present and the future. Just as we've come to know Alfred and Henry Brown anew, the future church will come to know us. They'll hear the stories of Kim and Scott, of Norah and Ash, of Zack and Amelia, of ministries formed and dreams sparked and this place wide open where all

⁵ Thanks to Sam Wells for this imagery, p143.

find their welcome, ready to see what God might do. *What might they learn when they read our story?*

V.

And now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine, to God be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen!