

Standing on the Promises
Caldwell Presbyterian Church - Centennial of Worship Sunday
May 20, 2012
Rev. John Cleghorn

Psalm 1, John 17:6-19

Let me begin by adding my deep appreciation to everyone who came out yesterday. I know the cloud of witnesses in heaven who have worshipped here over the decades smiled as they saw the 75 or so of you gather for worship. And then you so lovingly polished these old pews, wiped down every baseboards in the building, vacuumed out the crevices and spruced up the grounds. Then we were fed by our faithful Fellowship Committee whose members worked just as hard to prepare a wonderful meal.

As our Centennial Chair Beth Van Gorp said to us before we got started, we are all now trustees of what has been passed on to us by those who gave birth to this congregation. And yesterday, you lived up to that charge. Thank you all.

For those first worshippers here 100 years ago this weekend, worship was then – as it is now – the center of church life. In that era, family worship was strongly encouraged as a complement to congregational worship. When congregation's did gather, the 1912 Directory of Worship of our denomination instructed worshippers to take their seats decently and to approach the act of worship in “a grave and reverent manner.”

But even then, change, however small, was underway. Many churches still chanted the psalms as their primary expression of congregational singing. But hymns and hymnals were spreading in popularity.

As I said in yesterday's service we don't have much information about that first worship service a century ago yesterday. Session minutes simply state that “the first religious service was held.” Those first congregants gathered in a borrowed room at Elizabeth College, which is where Presbyterian Hospital now stands.

Despite all of that, what does come through – even in those understated meeting minutes – is the sense of possibility those first congregants shared. They saw this emerging outer edge of their city as a place to be claimed for God. One week after that first worship service, they voted to buy this corner piece of property for \$3,000. They set aside another \$1,500 for a wooden structure to be erected here. They saw what was possible and they acted.

Two years later, they built what they called the “Pioneer Chapel,” which is the building connected to this one and then, ten years later, they constructed the sanctuary where we worship now. All of that in a decade in which the world was plunged into the first World War and societal changes and ills raised new questions about where the world was headed.

Possibility and uncertainty. Possibility on one hand. Uncertainty on the other. The possibility in terms of what might happen in the name of God on this ridge that looked back on the center of this growing city and uncertainty in terms of world conflict and social upheaval.

Possibility and uncertainty. Possibility in terms of what might happen if America gave women the vote, which occurred in those same ten years. Uncertainty in terms of the crime, corruption and violence that eventually led to prohibition. Then, as now, it seems society lurched two steps ahead and then fell one step back, probing for the right way forward.

One hundred years later, we live in our own tension between possibility and uncertainty. Here at Caldwell, possibilities and potential loom so large. God has surely smiled on this place, again. We see new opportunities for what church can be for a wide and wonderfully diverse set of people who seek a relationship with God, with other disciples and with an increasingly pluralistic society. Time and again, you show up as you did yesterday to live into your discipleship, generating ministry on the scale of a church two or three times your size.

But we are surrounded by our share of uncertainty, too. Uncertainty about the future of our denomination and a question about the future of denominations overall. Uncertainty about Christianity at large and how we will handle the opportunity to co-exist in America and in the world alongside a growing number of other world religions. Uncertainty about widening cracks in the structure of our society that further separate the haves and have-nots to potentially explosive extents. Uncertainty over how our nation can ever come together to focus on the common problems that threaten all Americans, much less all citizens of the world.

How does one bridge the gap between possibility and uncertainty, sometimes paralyzing uncertainty? A century ago, those first worshippers forged ahead in faith, which the Apostle Paul defined as the “substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Surely that describes the motivation of those believers who moved out here then.

They were then, as we are now, standing on the promises. They were standing on the promises of the millions of believers who had come before them over 1,900 years of Christianity. They were standing on the promises of a God who in Christ said I will always be with you, a God who was and is and ever will be.

So we stand on their shoulders, just as they stood on the shoulders of those who had come before them... and, together, we stand on the promise that we call faith, amid the tension between possibility and uncertainty. And as audacious as it might sound to some, we can go forward into a new century knowing that Christ Jesus prays for us.

Of all the ideas and truths that scripture gives us, I have to admit that is one that I don't often stop and think about. But it's true. We know Christ prays for us – yes, us, you and me and this old church – because Christ prayed for his first assembly of believers, as we heard in the scripture reading from John.

It was a bold and explicit prayer Christ prayed, one by his own admission he asks not on his father's behalf. No, Jesus prayed on behalf of his followers, those he would leave behind as his body upon his ascension.

Jesus asked for three things:

First, he asked God to protect his followers, knowing they had disavowed themselves from the world and the world would not take kindly to that kind of dismissal.

Second, Jesus asked for joy for his apostles. I don't think he meant sunny happiness or some kind of smiley-faced over-coating. He meant the kind of joy that rests more deeply in our souls when we know that our lives are rooted in faith, like the trees in Psalm 1. The kind of joy that doesn't need any artificial stimulant, the kind of joy that comes from knowing who we are and whose we are.

And Jesus asked that his followers would continue to know the truth and that that truth would sanctify their lives. He asked that his followers would remain grounded in the truth of the gospel message, that we are to love our God with all our hearts and soul and mind and strength and our neighbors as ourselves.

Let us pray that Jesus still says that prayer for his people, even us, for these three things – protection in the world, the joy of our formed identities as Christians and the enduring truth of purpose, here at the corner of Park and 5th as we undertake a second century of worship and service, in the name of the one who was and is and ever will be, Amen.