

“The House That God Built.”

“And Since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.”

As I waited for Alice at the doctor’s office on Thursday, I met a woman from a Missionary Baptist Church who was studying against all odds for the ministry. Her church does not generally believe that a woman can be called to the ministry. She felt called and believed that the end of time is near. She is preparing to warn everybody to get ready for the near return of Jesus to judge the world. She wanted to know what I thought.

In 2000, Alice and I, after having been in Turkey for two weeks, traveled to the mount of Olives to see the place where Jesus ascended into heaven. There, Alice had her picture taken near a camel and I could see a view of the Holy City similar to what Jesus and his disciples saw in the Gospel lesson this morning. Of course, the temple had long since been destroyed and one could now see the skyline of modern Jerusalem against an overcast background. The view was spectacular even on such a day as that.

The scene was much different two thousand years ago. In the background, the disciples saw the beautiful temple, restored by Herod the Great with its white stones overlaid with gold, glittering in the sunlight. The disciples were so impressed that some remarked, *“Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings.”* Mark 13:1. But, Jesus replied, *“Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another, all will be thrown down.”* Mark 13: One thousand, nineteen hundred and sixty seven years later, only a wailing wall was left to mark that magnificence temple. Buildings and the edifices of mankind will rise and fall but the house that God built will last forever.

I. A House of Prophecy-I Samuel 1:4-20

Such a building was built by God many centuries before Christ from a woman named Hannah of Ramah, the second wife of Elkanah. Hannah was barren for many years and wanted so much to be a mother, but she could not. Any couple who wanted to have children and could not or any mother here this morning who has miscarried or lost a child can understand how Hannah must have felt. To add insult to injury, it was a time when most felt that a childless woman was somehow cursed by God and Elkanah’s other wife also made Hannah’s life miserable because of it.

The story of Hannah and Elkanah in I Samuel is a wonderful story of how God worked beyond all odds (barrenness) to build a house of prophecy. The prophet’s name was Samuel, “one who was asked of God.” This house was a house of flesh and blood and not stone and wood. It began a long line of true prophets. We will hear more about Samuel and Eli, prophets from the shrine at Shiloh, later. Hannah’s song of thanksgiving in I Samuel 2 was second only to the Magnificat sang by Mary at the news that she would be the mother of Jesus.

II. A House of Tradition At St. Barnabas

On last Sunday, Alice and I came to witness the investment of parents, godparents,

teachers and friends into the building of another house, a House of Tradition. This house too was a house of flesh and blood and not of stone and wood. Four young ladies, Anastasia and Hilary Chapman, Kelsey Sinclair and Merideth Grames, were further engrafted into the House of God here at St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church. We saw no gilded white stones, glittering in the sunlight, nevertheless, we observed the shining faces of all who have held, fed or nurtured these young ladies for the past decade plus years. All were proud to witness them give their lives and direction into the hands of Almighty God through confirmation. We heard no angels sing but we heard the angelic voices of these and others sing their praises and thanksgiving to God for that moment in the life of these girls. Today, we too sing our Magnificat to God on theirs and our behalf and wish them God speed all of the days of their lives.

III. The House of Sacrifice and Salvation-Hebrews 10:11-25

Hebrews points us toward the significance of God building a House of Salvation-a building not built with human hands. The magnificent temple at Jerusalem, the great cathedrals of Europe and the wonderful religious shrines around the world could never be compared to the house that God built two thousand years ago in his Son Jesus Christ. The book of Hebrews records that Jesus our Great High Priest replaced all of the priests that ever lived or will ever live. His self-sacrifice on Calvary encompassed and replaced all of the sacrifices that were made or could ever be made for our sins, once and for all. Our four young ladies were forgiven, blessed and symbolically engrafted into the House of Salvation last Sunday.

Jesus, the Christ, now sits at the favorable side of the Father interceding and watching over Anastasia, Hilary, Kelsey, Merideth and all of those who give their lives and direction to Him. For God said a long time ago, *"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds...I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."* Hebrews 10:16-17. Last Sunday marked an important step for our four young ladies.

I want the newly confirmed as well as all of us to remember that the Christian life is a journey, not a destination. We are pilgrims on the way to the new Jerusalem not residents of Holy Zion. And we journey not alone but together.

The most important thing to remember is that God is with us. Jesus is our companion and the Holy Spirit is our guide. We may walk through many valleys of the shadow of death, but we need not fear any evil. God's rod is there to protect us. God's staff is there to pull us back from any danger. We may be hungry, but God prepares a table before us. We may be bruised by life's traumas, but God will anoint us with the balm of Gilead. Goodness and mercy shall follow us all of the days of our lives. And, when it is time, we shall dwell in the heavenly House of the Lord for ever.

IV. A House of Hopeful Outcomes

The Gospel this week speaks further of an end-time, but concludes on a solemn and hopeful note. *"Then Jesus began to say to them, Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, there will be*

earthquakes in various places, there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” Mark 13:5-8. With these words, we realize that we are members of the House of Hopeful Outcomes.

You and I live in very painful times for most people. A psychiatrist killed many at Fort Hood. Our men and women are dying every day in foreign wars. Our children are destroying one another on our city and suburban streets. People around the world are dying every day from famine and starvation. And who knows when the next tsunami or another natural disaster may occur? In the face of all of these fearful possibilities, we have Jesus’ assurance. I will highlight two sayings, “But the end is still to come,” and “This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.” I take that to mean that God is still in charge and if we are in God’s hands, in God’s house, we need not worry. If you are still anxiety about an end-time, remember this further saying of Jesus, *“But of that day and that hour no one knows; not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* Mark 13:32.

Now back to the woman at the doctor’s office on last Thursday. I told her that Jesus said that there will be signs of the end and someone no doubt will be able to read them. I told her, nevertheless, that I was not unduly concerned about the end of time when Jesus will return to judge the world because of the three reasons listed in today’s gospel—the end is still to come, this is the beginning of the birthpangs and only God the Father knows when that time will be. I assured her that the most important thing is how we live our lives every day. To that end, I leave you with one other admonition from the House of God.

V. A House of Communal and Faithful Living

We do not know the day nor the hour, so, what are we to do in the mean time? Hebrews comforts us with the assurance that Jesus is the Great High Priest over the house that God built. God is the head of the household and the Holy Spirit is our guide and comforter. I, therefore, leave our newly confirmed and all of us with these from Hebrews. *“Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* Hebrews 10:23-25.

Psalm 127 (Paraphrased)

¹Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.

²It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives sleep to his beloved.

³(Daughters) are indeed a heritage from the LORD, the fruit of the womb a reward.

⁴Like (jewels on the finger of a bride) are the (daughters) of one’s youth.

⁵Happy (are the parents) who (have their) quiver full of them. (They) shall not be

put to shame when (they) are spoken for at the gate.

**O God, we pray your blessings upon Anastasia, Hilary, Kelsey and Merideth, their parents, godparents, teachers and upon the members of St. Barnabas' Church.
Amen.**