

A COMMUNITY OF HOPE

Psalm 16:3; Ephesians 1:15-23

Yearlong celebration of the 200th anniversary of the congregation
May 17, 2009

Prayer for Illumination

God our helper, we thank you that you are God and there is no other. We thank you for this wonderful congregation, for anniversaries and special days—for the opportunity to pause and get our bearings, to know anew who we are and whose we are. We pray that, through the written Word, and the spoken word, we may know anew the Living Word, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

This has been a challenging ‘sermon’ to prepare, because there is so much on my mind that I want to share with you, that isn’t ‘sermon’ material. So, please bear with me, as I try to do something of both! I want to begin with a heart-felt THANK YOU, to Roula, the Session, and the Bicentennial Committee, for inviting me to be a part of this 200th Anniversary Celebration. It is my great honor and a wonderful joy for Ruth and me to be here. It has been almost ten years since I last preached from this pulpit. I was to preach in June of 2004, but my Dad died a few days before that Sunday, and we had to cancel our trip to Batavia.

I was afraid that I might not get back to Batavia before I lost all my hair! Though I remember all too well that, on one of those special big-number birthdays, good friends Jim and Glenda Weller presented me with a very nice round piece of carpet, which I was to place on my head when preaching, so as to not blind those sitting in the balcony with the glare! Some of you, like me, might take comfort in verses like Leviticus 13:40: “**And a man, if his head becomes bald, he is bald; he is clean.**” I’m not exactly sure of what this verse is all about—but “clean” sounds good to me!

We were recently in the Baltimore area, where our two daughters, Christine and Mary Beth have settled. They both have two children, a boy and a girl each, and Christine’s youngest, Anna, was born on April 13. I was looking at the 8th grade Confirmation Bible Mary Beth received when she united with this church. She had underlined and highlighted a number of verses, and one that especially drew my attention was Psalm 16, verse 3, one of the Scriptures I have selected for this morning. It describes well my sentiment on this visit: “***How excellent are the Lord’s faithful people! My greatest pleasure is to be with them.***”

So true! I have often remembered you in my thoughts and prayers, and among all the special memories are those of several in the congregation who have been ‘promoted to Glory’. I think of Ward Huntting, an officer and leader in the church. He stood by my bedside when I was hospitalized early in my ministry, and prayed for and with me. Pastors had visited, but none of them prayed with me. I was humbled and thankful for Ward’s faith and presence, realizing that his pastor was in need of the assurance of God’s grace and healing. Lucy Preston, an Elder in the church, also made a powerful impact on my life. I was visiting with her in her home, and she wasn’t doing so well, but still she asked me: “*How are you doing, John? How are you doing, really?*” I have never forgotten the sincerity of her inquiry into my well being, which has been a living example through the years.

And there was the one-of-a-kind Sis Babbage. She celebrated her 100th birthday with a party right here at church a few years ago. After I moved to Green Valley, Sis kept in touch. She called on every birthday, and wrote from time to time, and when she did, she always included a

joke or two. One of my favorites was this one, which she sent when she learned that I wasn't feeling well:

“Back in the “old country” they would rub bear grease all over you and then wrap you in an old sock and a piece of chicken fat to cure you---that's why so many people left the old country!” Get well soon, she added.

It is fun to be here this weekend to share some of the stories of life with you, and to enjoy yours as well. That said I have been invited to preach today, not just to tell a few stories. I expect that I need to keep in mind something that George Burns once said: “*The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and to have the two as close together as possible.*” I will do my best!

A two-hundredth anniversary celebration covers a lot of ground. Two hundred years is a long time! It is almost as long as the history of the United States of America, and far longer than most of the governments of the world. Those early beginnings in 1809 saw 12 believers gathered somewhere in the shadow of Stafford Hill. With others who joined them, they eventually decided to become a part of the Presbyterian ‘flavor’ of Christ-Ones. Still, as interesting as it is to look backward, virtually everyone who has entered the doors of the Batavia Presbyterian Church over those 200 years has done so looking forward. Everyone of us was—and is—concerned about tomorrow, concerned about the world we will encounter; the decisions we will face, the people we will be when we leave this sanctuary and head to our homes, our families, our jobs, to life.

Therefore, we celebrate this anniversary not simply because this congregation, this church, has endured for two hundred years. We celebrate because we have shared faith, given hope, tackled problems, held hands, exchanged hugs, sought justice, offered prayers, sung songs, had fun, worked together, and loved and served the Lord. In all of this we have been a congregation of God's people publicly known to others by the place where we have gathered; the First Presbyterian Church, at the corner of Main and Liberty. Yes, *Celebrating the Past*, we *continue to gather*, *Embracing the Future*.

In many respects the church is no different from a lot of other institutions. For example, we have no special dispensation that allows us to ignore paying our bills. We have to fix the roof when it leaks (or better, before it leaks)! We have to keep the heat on in the winter months.

Like other institutions, we have our times of conflict. The church is like a family in this respect. It is made up of people who have different concerns, commitments, and expectations. So, it is inevitable that we are not always going to agree about what we are going to do or how we are going to do it. Someone once said it well: “*The church in heaven is all saints; the church on earth is all sorts!*” In the church, as in the family, we simply have to keep working on our relationships.

What is distinctive about the church is that it helps me be bigger than I am. Listen to the words of an anthem sung earlier this year by the choir in Green Valley:

“You raise me up so I can stand on mountains.
You raise me up to walk on stormy seas.
I am strong when I am on your shoulders.

You raise me up to more than I can be.”

Speaking of the church, it is where I get stretched, where this self that is me is expanded, even at times, ennobled.

There are a lot of institutions I can belong to which leave me virtually untouched: the way I leave is the way I came in. There are some organizations which will shrink me if I enter them: I will exit smaller, maybe more narrow minded, possibly more intolerant and inflexible than when I entered. But, the church—if it is truly the church, the body of Christ—will lift me to new heights! It will make me a bigger person, more compassionate, and more generous. Every week it will summon me to struggle against all that is ugly and unloving in the world. It calls me to be a peace-maker.

And the church will connect me with a long line of men and women of whom, as the Book of Hebrews puts it, “the world was not worthy” – from Abraham and Sarah to Peter and Paul, to St. Francis and Martin Luther and St. Teresa, to a host of forgotten “saints” who founded hospitals, established schools and colleges and orphanages and the like – all in the name of Jesus Christ. What’s unique about the church is that it connects me with Jesus Christ and with a lot of Christ-like-ones. So, I speak of the church as **A COMMUNITY OF HOPE**.

When I speak of ‘hope’ I do not have in mind the feeble cliché that we attach to our announcement of up-coming programs: “It is hoped that a goodly number of Batavia Presbyterians will attend this week’s ‘whatever-it-is’”. Hope is not the same as optimism. In the Bible ‘hope’ is a strong word, ranked right up there with ‘faith’ and ‘love’ as the marks of a Christian. Hope is faith facing forward. Hope is the confidence that God will be faithful in the future, no matter what comes our way, as He has been in the past. It is the conviction that, for all the darkness and gloom we encounter in the world or in our own lives, there is a kingdom of life and light and love toward which we are being drawn.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians he knew how vulnerable we are to despair. That is why he reminded us of the One who is both the Source and Sustainer of hope. **“I pray that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know the hope to which he has called you,” he writes, “and how rich are the wonderful blessings he promises to us who trust in him...”**

The power that was at work then is available now, the Apostle declares. And many who worship within these very walls today bear personal testimony to this truth. The church is the one community that is aware (or should be) of the mighty strength of God among us.

What’s so special about the Church?

It’s the place that won’t let you and me give up.

It’s the place where we are called to recognize God’s faithfulness and respond, not just with a hopeful mood, but with hopeful actions.

In Elmer Bendiner’s book, THE FALL OF FORTRESSES, he describes one bombing run over the German city of Kassel, during WW II:

“Our B-17 was barraged by flak from Nazi anti-aircraft guns. That was not unusual, but on this particular occasion our gas tanks were hit. Later, as I reflected on the miracle of a twenty-millimeter shell piercing the fuel tank without touching off an explosion, our pilot, Bohn Fawkes, told me it was not quite that simple.

On the morning following the raid, Bohn had gone down to ask our crew chief for that shell as a souvenir of unbelievable luck. The crew chief told Bohn that not just one shell but eleven had been found in the gas tanks – eleven unexploded shells where only one was sufficient to blast us out of the sky. It was as if the sea had been parted for us. Even after all these years, so awesome an event leaves me shaken, especially after I heard the rest of the story.

Bohn was told that the shells had been sent to the armorers to be defused. The armorers told him that intelligence had picked them up. They could not say why at the time, but Bohn eventually sought out the answer. Apparently when the armorers opened each of those shells, they found no explosive charge. They were clean as a whistle and just as harmless. Empty? Not all of them.

One contained a carefully rolled piece of paper. On it was a scrawl in Czech. The intelligence people scoured our base for someone who could read the Czechoslovakian language. Eventually, they found one to decipher the note. It set us marveling. Translated, the note read: “This is all we can do for you now.” Now, that is an action filled with hope! This is all we can do for you now—but no matter, this we can do!

If anyone is here asking, “What does the church have to offer that’s unique?”, this is how I would answer. The church is THE COMMUNITY OF HOPE. It is the place where we are helped to see, not just what is, but what might be. It’s the place where we are reminded of God’s faithfulness and power. It is the place where we are called to live out our lives in hope. It is also the place where we can be lifted out of our petty preoccupations, carried through the conflicts which tear the world, and at times our lives apart, and be united in our pursuit of some wonderful and worthy ideals, as we follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

As we seek to serve our Lord in our daily life, the church is where you and I become bigger than we are.

*And that, my friends, is how, with God’s help, this congregation of God’s people at the corner of Main and Liberty will best Celebrate the Past and Embrace the Future, as
A COMMUNITY OF HOPE!*

Amen...and so be it...in my life...and in yours!

Let us pray: Our God, thank you for calling us to be a part of the Church, your Community of Hope. Help us to never lose sight of your purposes or forget your love. Keep us useful in your service, glad and confident in our faith, and may we always be that presence which brings hope. In Jesus’ name. Amen.