

At Long Last

I Kings 8:22-30
Ephesians 6:10-20

Every four or five years this congregation forms a Strategic Planning Task Force. These groups try to climb above the daily demands of doing ministry, to rise to a perspective from which to think more long-term about how this church might remain faithful to God's calls upon us. We currently have a Strategic Planning Task Force in operation. The *previous* task force set five goals for the church. We have accomplished four of the five. On the fifth we have made virtually no progress. But then, that goal may not have been terribly realistic to start with.

I could dwell on that unmet goal, but this newest task force has reached a consensus that we have spent enough time on the downside. We have satisfied ourselves that all churches—especially those from the Old Line denominations like ours—have faced the same headwinds. COVID, aging demographics, the rise of virtual worship options, retirements and movings away, controversies over divisive issues: they have all taken a toll. Yet Central Presbyterian remains strong in a number of ways. Can we identify them, and then “run to our strengths”? In the mid 1960's the Green Bay Packers dominated the National Football League. Their offense ran the same play about ten times a game for ten years. It was called the Pull Sweep. Their coach, Vince Lombardi, was fond of saying, “They know we're going to run that play.

They know how we do it. But if we execute it properly *nobody* can stop it.”

In what ways is Central Presbyterian unstoppable? Others will have different ideas, but to my mind we excel in a few areas: maintaining high quality, traditional worship; supporting missions near and far with money and volunteers; and hanging out together. Having fun fellowship. Like this afternoon's picnic.

From the reading the task force has done, we have learned the importance not only of running to our strengths, but also of making what author Tod Bolsinger calls, “little experiments”. Try things. They must fit the character and beliefs of our church, but try them, Do not spend too much time or money on advance planning. Just try them. If they work, or even look as though they might work, keep going. If they do not, let go of them straightaway. Or as task force member Andrew Conner has said, let things “fail fast”. Another key to this approach is to encourage the church to have fun while it tries new things. This idea runs counter to the way churches I have served have almost always started new initiatives. Usually, committees have met, formed plans and budgets, made careful plans. Put out lots of advance publicity. Not a lot of fun—unless you like planning and budget meetings.

Our Christian Educator Ellie Templeton does not serve on the current Strategic Planning Task Force. But she has done some of the reading. And she has tried a couple of fun new things that appear to have potential. I do not know whether she has done so intentionally in response to the reading, or whether she has just tried them

because of her sunny disposition. Whatever the cause, the two fun fellowship gatherings for women she offered have generated a *lot* of positive feedback. The pool party at Jeannie Roze's home also fits this paradigm. Another small change we have tried is to insert congregational singing of each summer Sunday's lectionary Psalm as the "Special Music" between the scripture readings. One person had this brainstorm and suggested we give it a go. I immediately saw that it fit with the "just try things" approach. Several of you have thanked me for it.

At long last we see a little sunshine. The light has just started to clear the horizon, but we can see it. It feels good. It feels like that repeated line in one of the greatest, most sophisticated, highest art films ever made: the Blues Brothers. Jake Blues, John Belushi's character, says, "We're putting the band back together." We have lost a few members of the Central Presbyterian band. Some have moved away, others have died, still others disagreed with decisions our elders made and left us. But the rest of the band is coming back together. And we do have a few new members, people who have given us energy, financial and volunteer support, enthusiasm, and who like to have fun together with their church family. At long last.

Here comes what writing teachers call a "labored transition". In our passage from I Kings Solomon gets to pray a prayer of dedication over the newly-constructed temple *at long last*. His father, King David, had longed to build a temple for the worship of Yahweh, but Yahweh had told him, "No!" From the time of Moses, some six hundred years before, the only structure the Hebrews used for worship was a tent.

Inside it, on a dais, lay the Ark of the Covenant, which was a rectangular box that contained the tablets inscribed with the law, which God had given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Ark and the tent moved with the Hebrews on their forty years of wandering through the wilderness. Each time they struck camp they struck that tent, threaded poles through eyelets on the long sides of the Ark, and carried them both with them. Once they inhabited the Promised Land, they pitched that tent in various places.

King David felt this was beneath Yahweh. Other “gods” had ornate, impressive temples. Why did not the only, one, true God, Yahweh, have one too? But Yahweh did not relent. David was a complicated man. While he proved an effective military leader and a poet of great skill in lauding Yahweh, he had a dark side. (Spoiler alert: we all do.) He sinned and as the great revivalist preacher of the early 19th century, George Whitefield, liked to say, “He sinned big.” Therefore Yahweh delayed a public works project of immense religious importance, the construction of a temple, until David, as a Presbyterian pastor friend of mine likes to say, “Entered his eternal home.”

Enter Solomon, David's son. With his accession to the throne Yahweh changes the directive. At long last, *now* the people of Israel may build a temple in Jerusalem. And man, do they. We lived among cedar trees in northern Michigan. They seem somehow the perfect visual complement to lake water. But the biggest on our property, I suppose, was perhaps thirty feet tall. Most of them were less than half that size. The cedars of Lebanon, from which the Hebrews fashioned the rafters of the temple, were reputedly five feet in diameter and far, far taller. Scholars have often

marveled at the question of how people living three thousand years ago transported those massive cedar trunks to Jerusalem without the benefit of a water route. And then they hoisted them up as high as our ceiling here in the sanctuary and fit them into the roof system. Rather as people have long stood in awe of the ancients who somehow moved the monoliths of Stonehenge, most weighing more than three tons, dozens of miles, without horses or mules or—of course—any sort of powered vehicle, *and then hoisted some of them up to become the crossbars on the monument.*

Under Solomon's governance the Hebrews built that temple. And in our passage he prays a dedication over it as a finished product. His prayer is saturated with references to David. But appropriately, Solomon does not dwell on David's disappointment in not having built the place himself. Instead, Solomon refers repeatedly to the covenant Yahweh had made with David. Specifically, Solomon prays that Yahweh might remember the promise always to place a descendant of David “on his throne”. To the Hebrews this meant that God would always provide a literal descendant of David's to rule over the Promised Land. We Christians, however, have always taken this as a prediction that the Messiah would, first, come from the “house and lineage of David; and, second, become an eternal king, ruling over God's people. In short, we believe these covenant promises are fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus came into this world nearly a thousand years after Solomon prayed this prayer. Many were the intervening years in which *no* Hebrew king ruled. The people languished in exile. Their kings were deposed and blinded and murdered. If God's

covenant were to remain in force it required that its literal interpretation—that a blood descendant of David perpetually sit on the Hebrew throne—be false. The truth, we believe, is that Jesus kept the promise. The Apostle Paul certainly agreed.

In the letter to the Ephesians Paul had, before our passage for today, written eloquently of God's faithfulness. When God made a promise, God would keep it. What remains for God's people is to protect ourselves, spiritually, from those forces which try to drive us away from believing in God. In our passage, Paul wrote a famous extended metaphor, the whole armor of God. He meant that we followers of Jesus must take advantage of every spiritual protection, that we might stay in God's fold. *This is one of the primary purposes of the church: to provide space in which we can stay connected to God in Christ Jesus.*

All of our strategic planning must keep this in mind. For all our words about experimenting light-heartedly, failing fast, and flying at 50,000 feet above the ground so we can truly make strategic decisions, we on the task force must remember why we are making this attempt. Furthermore, we still have the calling to produce strategic thinking, more fully-formed ideas and recommendations. I believe we will. The members of the task force are working with faithful dedication to the work to which God has called us. The fact of the matter is we stand at one of those pivotal moments in our church's history. We can either back down from the challenges our post-modern society poses, or we can seek God's direction for how to meet them. I vote for the latter.