

A Season of Celebration - A Community of Faith: 137 Years of Ministry

First Sermon in a series of Stewardship Sermons at FBC, Boulder, 2009

Slayden Yarbrough
First Baptist Church, Boulder, CO
June 28, 2009

Text: Ecclesiastes 3:1-12

INTRODUCTION: One of the writers in the OT that I really like is the author of Ecclesiastes, which translates "preacher" or "teacher." The preacher is a *skeptic*. He simply does not accept traditional or pat answers. He asks hard questions and does not fear hard answers. He is a *realist*. He looks at the world and humanity and religion and God from a *very honest perspective*. He truly *understands the past and also has exceptional insights into the future*. The most well-known passage in the book is in chapter 3, which provides the theme for our stewardship campaign.

This morning, we are kicking off that stewardship campaign entitled "A Season of Celebration." Dwight Neuenschwander is chair of a large committee that has been working on a strategy, and Dwight came up with the idea for the theme and also for the strategy. For the next few months we will focus one Sunday each month on the theme "A Season of Celebration." We will talk about the history and the heritage of FBC, Boulder. We will be reminded of our commitment to world missions, to community ministry, and to the importance of our continuing the wonderful heritage of our congregation, which is soon to celebrate its 137th year of existence.

I. Highlights of 137 Years: I am a church historian and I enjoy reading the old records and the histories of particular churches. FBC, Boulder has a few histories that have been written and they provide some interesting insights into the courage and commitment of those who came before us. As we look at some of our heritage, I have been paying particular interest in developments related to finances and ministry.

A. Beginnings: 1872, almost 137 years ago First Baptist Church of Boulder organized. Colorado was four years away from becoming a state. What was going on when this happened? O. Carroll Arnold in the "Foreword" to Clarence W. Kemper's *The First Baptist Church of Boulder, Colorado* (1942) describes the world of 1872. Boulder was a place of some 5,000 people. It had its beginning some 13 years earlier when gold was discovered in rugged Boulder Canyon by Charles Clouser and five other men. They named the place Gold Run. The town was a mining camp and "Taos Lightnin" was a fiery liquor available in the numerous saloons of Boulder.

"Home on the Range" was written two years earlier by Dr. Brewster Higley, whom I might point out is buried in the Fairview Cemetery in Shawnee, OK, where Janis and I lived for 22 years. The Sand Lake Massacre took place eight years earlier. The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the death of George Custer and his soldiers in battle against the forces of Chief Sitting Bull and Chief Crazy Horse was four years in the future. Indian leaders like Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and Cochise roamed the plains. Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill Cody were the names of westerners who had or would be making an impact.

The Wells Fargo Stage had just begun operating the newly opened Boulder Canyon road and the price for the trip from Boulder to Caribou was \$1.50. The road crossed Boulder Creek thirty-three times over as many bridges during these first years. The road was so narrow that when two rigs met, the lighter rig was unhitched, and the lighter wagon was turned on its side so that the heavier outfit could pass.

Baptist work in Colorado was less than ten years old when FBC, Boulder began. In 1863 during the Civil War a Baptist church in Golden was organized. The next year FBC, Denver came into existence, and today is the oldest continuous Baptist church in Colorado.

At 1 p.m. on October 13, 1872, First Baptist church of Boulder began in the home of Mrs. M. C. Tibbets. A small group met to form a "Regular Baptist Church." The name "Regular" was applied to those more Calvinistic Baptist churches of the period. Such churches would have been supportive of the Triennial Convention and the American Baptist Home Mission Society. Six persons comprised this new congregation, Emily L. Beach, Mary M. Philips. M. C. Tibbets, J. M. Philips, A. M. Brent, and J. G. Maver, who was chosen as secretary. The record states that they held "letters of dismissal from 'Regular' Baptist churches. Because of distance and lack of convenience in travel and communication, persons who moved to a new area often carried with them their church letters.

Mr. Maver was licensed to preach, but was not ordained. He was called as the first pastor of the church. The group called for an ordination council and also agreed to make application to the Baptist Home Mission Society for \$600 a year to assist in the support of the minister. The request seemed to be repeated each year as new pastors arrived.

The first baptisms seem to have taken place on August 6, 1873. Two new members were baptized and two were added by letter. By the end of the first year the church membership totaled sixteen.

From these humble beginnings came a church that still ministers in the Boulder community 137 years later. Who we are today has been molded and shaped by so many, named and unnamed, who were members of this historic congregation. The long list of Baptists in this place faced all kinds of problems, issues, opportunities, setbacks and successes.

As we begin once more to anticipate our future, we can learn from our past.

B. Challenges and Opportunities:

1 Membership: Six members comprised the new congregation in 1872, that makes our situation look very good in these days. During 1953 the membership during the tenure of Rev. Paul O. Madsen reached 1,008. I have two questions. "Where did they park?" And, "Where did they go?"

Methods to increase the membership varied from period to period and pastor to pastor. At times professional evangelists were enlisted to increase the flock. In 1908, FBC joined other churches in inviting the famous (or infamous?) Billy Sunday to lead a meeting in Boulder. The former baseball player earned a reputation for speaking out against the devil and John Barleycorn in a world that conflicted over prohibition, and Sunday was well known for his theatrics, such as pulling off his coat when he got warmed up. Following his meeting Boulder voted by a substantial majority to be "dry" when it came to alcohol. First Baptist apparently benefited from Billy Sunday's presence. The history tells that at the first communion service following the meetings, the line of new members extended the greater part of the way around the church and the members marched past them, shaking hands with each other. During that year there were 125 baptisms, and 94 joined the church by letter or experience.

Professional evangelists came and went. One evangelist who came our way in the fall of 1927 was "Big Bill" Cramer. Apparently there was some hesitation in inviting him, but he wound up being scheduled for a two week meeting. Although there were some professions of faith and additions to the church, overall the meeting was a great disappointment. The record states that Dr. Cramer was a "high power" professional evangelist, and that his methods did not "fit in" at FBC, Boulder. The venture was also deemed to be expensive, as the evangelist had expected a liberal "freewill" offering. These and other factors resulted in an adverse reaction to professional evangelists.

In fact, the history of FBC questions whether many real converts were made at such meeting, even though the evangelists did produce results. FBC has been ineffective throughout its history by evangelizing through Sunday schools, college ministries, and just solid evangelistic preaching. As I anticipate the future for our congregation, we must find or create new means of proclaiming the good news to our community.

2. Facilities: Any church that has survived for 137 years certainly will have gone through a number of building programs. FBC is no exception. As I read the history of our church up into the 1960s I was impressed by the dedication and vision of those who came before us. They believed in what they were doing. And they were committed to providing the resources and the energy necessary to address the physical needs of the congregation.

J. G. Maver, the very first pastor, resigned at the end of eleven months. One reason given in his own words was that "in the demand for a meeting house I feel that another man can do more than I can to aid the enterprise." Following his resignation, the church voted to form a building committee, and asked the Home Mission Society to make a loan of \$600 toward the purchase of lots and the construction of a church building. The record states that the first church building was built on 16th Street near the corner of Spruce.

By the time that Rev. E. G. Lane was called in 1895 the church was facing severe financial problems. The history of the church in most descriptive language states that "The church, which seems to never to have learned the grace of giving, was then in debt as usual." In fact the congregation had tried to borrow "\$1,000 from the Building and Loan Department of the Home Mission Society to square up old accounts."

Rev. Lane found the small, unsuitable church building "a constant source of annoyance." He began to encourage the people to secure a better building. After a period of stuttering and starting, a building committee was appointed in 1899. Expansion of the church building added additional space and a highlight of the efforts was the installation of a new furnace! Still, the efforts were not sufficient and a growing Sunday School and congregation demanded additional alterations and enlargement. A dedication service for additional changes took place in 1906, a year before Rev. Lane's resignation.

One of the interesting side notes to the building story concerned the organ. The first organ was loaned to the church by Mr. and Mrs. Ben Williams. It was an "American Cottage" organ, which Mrs. Williams had brought from her home in Boston in 1867. It was the first organ in Boulder, and the church eventually purchased it.

During the pastorate of Dr. F. B. Palmer (Sept. 20, 1907-Feb. 20, 1913) a large, expensive organ was ordered, which was not suitable for the church. Eventually, the order was rescinded and the church had to pay \$500 to the company for damages. Later, a smaller, more suitable organ was purchased for \$1,800.

During the pastorate of Rev. J. H. Skeen the church purchased two lots on the corner of 13th and Pine Streets for \$6,000. A Building Committee began to make plans for a new church

building. The early 1920s was a heady period in terms of the economy and finances. The church began to solicit pledges for the project and it concluded that \$125,000 had been pledged. The new church, the one in which we meet today, was dedicated during the weekend of June 6-8, 1926. The final cost was considered to be \$148,000. The depression contributed greatly to a long-time indebtedness because of the building. But through efficient efforts and creative financing, somehow the church made it through the crisis that effected the entire nation.

In 1947 during the pastorate of Rev. Clarence W. Kemper the building debt was liquidated. The mortgage was burned on the 75th anniversary of the founding of FBC, Boulder. The church membership increased to 900 during Kemper's tenure. One cannot underestimate the importance of an adequate building to handle the church growth, along with dedicated leadership through the challenging times.

3. Finances: The historical record demonstrates that time and time again FBC faced financial challenges. Building campaigns, the depression, recessions, wars, etc. all had their impact.

During the first twenty-five years of the church no great progress was made in systematic support of the church or weekly commitments and payments of Christian obligations. The history states, that "Time after time the record shows the church going out with subscription papers for lump-sum giving which always spelled failure."

FBC was not immune to financial challenges resulting from building programs, declining and increasing salaries, indebtedness, and financial problems resulting from depressions, economic downturns, and wars. But the people remained faithful, the church found ways to move forward, and today we are here because of the stewardship of talents, lives, and resources of thousands who came before us. I will not elaborate on all of the crises that the church faced. I will simply state that time and again she responded in faithfulness and by sacrifice.

4. Ministries and missions: As I examined the records of FBC, this congregation has responded in so many ways. The gospel has been proclaimed in Boulder for 137 years, and so must this be in the future. Education programs, college ministries, denominational emphases, social ministries, international missions, home missions, young adult ministries, children's ministries, music ministries, and on and on.

Read the history and remember the commitment. Stewardship has been expressed in service, in ministry, in missions, and in resources. But we live not in the past but the present. It is for today and for tomorrow that we come, that we commit, that we serve and minister.

II. Lessons from 137 Years:

A. Every generation of Christians finds itself in a critical time in terms of both continuing the heritage of the past and also determining what will be in place for the future. We must know our roots, and we must understand the struggles and the successes of those upon whose shoulders we stand.

At the same time we must honestly and openly address our generation, our time with a depth of commitment that at least parallels that of those who came before us. B. Areas of Commitment and Stewardship

1. Mission, ministry, service - our identity must focus on our service and ministry. We are called to serve; we are called to live; we are called to be stewards of our individual and corporate gifts.

2. Financial commitment - FBC has no debt thanks to so many who came before us. Our church sits upon a valuable piece of property in one of the most influential cities in Colorado. Yet this property is not ours, it is the legacy of those who came before us; it is the testimony to their service and their faithfulness.

Example: Church of the Master - I served this congregation for 26 months as interim pastor. The church had decided that it could no longer sustain its ministry and began to make plans to sell its beautiful building in park Hill, one of the wonderful and historical areas of Denver.

What amazed me was the fact that these people never saw that property in terms of ownership but in terms of stewardship. They had received this wonderful place of worship and education from the labors of others. They never paid a dime for this privilege. When they sold the property they were totally committed to using the resources to minister to others. They gave to missions and ministries of the ABC and the ABCRM; they gave to local needs that had connections with their people; they gave to needy sister congregations; they donated furnishing to a new congregation; they gave to a sister church who was facing severe financial crises; and they gave to help a former pastor and his wife who were facing the financial burdens of illness. Not once did they hesitate, not once did they bemoan the fact that they were giving these resources. All that had come their way was a gift of God and it came through the stewardship of others. And, therefore, they simply were following the example of those upon whose shoulders they stood. The mission and ministry of the now defunct church never ended. In a very real way its members continue to be very good stewards.

Conclusions: The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is an appointed time, a season for every purpose under heaven. We must ask ourselves "What time is it for First Baptist of Boulder?"

- A. It is a time to remember and a time to hope.
- B. It is a time for courage and a time for commitment.
- C. It is a time to acknowledge the stewardship of those who have come before us in the past 137 years, and a time to continue the stewardship of life and resources.
- D. It is a time to dream dreams, to believe in God, and it is a time to believe in ourselves. It is a time for doing.

There is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. And this is the time that God has called us to go forth with courage and commitment, good stewards of all that we have for the good of others.

This is truly a time for "A Season of Celebration" for First Baptist Church of Boulder, Colorado!