

Season of Celebration: Where Have You Come From, and Where Are You Going?

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Text: Genesis 16:7-8, Paul's statement in Romans 1:14 that "I am a debtor to all men."

Introduction:

This morning is a special day in the life of First Baptist Church of Boulder. It is both a conclusion and a beginning. This morning we conclude a stewardship campaign that began a few months ago, a campaign that we call "A Season of Celebration." Up to now, we have had four special services in which we have emphasized the heritage of this congregation by remembering our past, examining important events and personalities in our 137 year history. We have recognized the longtime commitment to the cause of missions, both at home and abroad. We have been reminded of our dedication to serving the needs of this community. And today, we are going to respond to the challenges of the present and the future, not just in terms of financial commitment but in terms of our taking inventory of who we are individually and collectively. So on this day, we will conclude our efforts which have prepared us for this moment.

At the same time today is a day of new beginnings. Baptists are good at starting over. Our concept of grace and forgiveness allows us to recognize our short-comings and to start over with a clean slate as we seek to be God's people. We can foul up, falter, and fall flat on our faces. Yet, still God is always there to forgive, to renew, and to restore. Thank goodness for that. "Father, forgive us because we don't know what we are doing" is a pretty important prayer when we need a new beginning.

I really think that the idea of a new beginning is especially important today. First Baptist Church has spent the past year plus closing the books on a previous ministry, evaluating where this congregation happens to be at this juncture in its life, and beginning to build upon the foundation of 137 years as it anticipates a new era of hopes and dreams and leadership.

I. One of the wonderful passages in the OT comes from the Book of Genesis, chapter 16:7-8. In these few verses there is the story, the challenge to Hagar, the handmaiden of Sarah, the wife of Abraham. Most of us know the story but the highlights are worth repeating. Abraham was the patriarch of his family, the leader when it came to so many areas, such as economics, politics, and religion. The world was quite different than our world, but we can always find parallels in terms of issues and challenges.

God had made a covenant with Abraham, promising him that he would become the father of a great nation, the leader of many peoples, and that he would have countless descendants that could only be numbered like the sand. Abraham for his part pledged obedience to God.

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The promise of numerous descendants posed a dilemma for Abraham, when no son arrived. He took the step initially of adopting his trusted servant, Eliezer of Damascus, to be his heir. Adoption "papers" found at a place called Nuzi confirm this practice in the ancient world. But Abraham still faced the issue that the promise of God did not go away. Stage two in this story is when Sarah, the wife of Abraham and one who had reached old age and was still childless, sent her handmaiden Hagar in to Abraham and Hagar conceived. Again, this was a common practice in the ancient world. Children were a blessing, and not just spiritually. Children were an economic blessing! They could work! The more children you had, the more laborers you had. Such was the culture even in the days of my grandfather Alexander Yarbrough, who fathered at least 21 or 22 children by three different wives. Those that survived were workers on Alexander's farm in Tennessee. For those of us who have tried to raise and educate children in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we have now realized that children have become an economic liability.

Back to the story. Hagar became pregnant and Sarah became jealous. The outcome of this was that Sarah drove her handmaiden away. In these circumstances, Hagar arrived at an oasis in the Wilderness of Sin. Here she is confronted by an angel of the Lord. Keep in mind that the term "angel of the Lord" often referred to a representative of God in human form. The angel of the Lord asked the confused and frightened Hagar an important question, or is it two questions? He asked her "Hagar, handmaiden of Sarah, where have you come from, and where are you going?" If you are a historian of any bent, these are really great questions. I have found over the years that I can do just about anything that I want to with these questions. They seem to relate to so many situations, and I have used them in many sermons to get to the heart of an issue. It is quite simple. When we find ourselves facing some problem, some issue, some challenge, we are called upon to look at our past, and then to look at our future. The two are so intertwined.

In the case of Hagar, she was reminded that her home was in the household of Abraham, and that her child, who would be a son named Ishmael, would have a legitimate claim to be there and to be the heir as the only son of Abraham – at least for a while. Ishmael would replace, at least for a while, Eliezer of Damascus, as Abraham's heir and the future leader of the family. Hagar also discovered that her action in light of this situation would determine the future. And it did. She went back, Ishmael was born, and he became the heir of Abraham until later on Sarah, who was long past child-bearing age, gave birth to Isaac. Isaac then replaced Ishmael and became Patriarch of the Hebrews.

What is interesting about this story is that the Arabs trace their lineage back to Abraham but they do it through Ishmael. In fact, there is a story about Abraham being willing to sacrifice his son that is very similar to the story about Isaac, except that in the Arab tradition, the son is Ishmael. The history of conflict between the two brothers has carried forth in the two traditions even into the 21st century. Yet I would remind you that they were brothers, or at least half brothers.

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II. The question or questions that the angel of the Lord asked Hagar are relevant to us here today at First Baptist Church of Boulder. "Where have we come from, and where are we going?" With one eye on the past, and one eye focused on the future, we are at an important point in time.

If we are to move forward in the days and months and years ahead, we must remember how we got to this point in time today. And, we have been reminded. There are so many witnesses who have passed through the 137 year history of this congregation who have given of their time, their talent, and their resources to bring us to this point in 2009. This church has ministered to this community time and time again in proclaiming the Good News that we have received in Jesus Christ. This church, those people who came before us, have dreamed dreams, they have had and have followed visions, and they have established a record of constancy if not always consistency in making this church what it is today.

The members of First Baptist throughout its history have built buildings as places of worship and service. We worship in this building, which was dedicated in 1926, because the members of this congregation provided their labor and their money over 80 years ago. We enjoy magnificent music because so many who came before us gave sacrificially and beyond their normal contributions to buy pianos and to purchase organs. For 137 years members of this church have contributed to the salaries of staff, to the purchase of educational materials, to the support of missions and ministry, and often did so at a great sacrifice.

As Paul said in Romans, he is a debtor to all men. And so are we. One of the greatest lessons that I have learned in this regard since coming to Colorado was discovered in my time as interim pastor of Church of the Master. The congregation had reached the conclusion that it could no longer continue because of declining membership and an unresponsive community. They decided to sell their beautiful church in the Park Hill community in Denver, and they eventually did. What was remarkable to me was that at no time did they ever consider that property or the money from its sale as something that they were entitled to. They realized that others had provided the money to buy the property and to build the building. They took less money than they thought the building was worth, but never complained one bit because the building was going to be used by another church of another denomination. And they gave away every penny without murmuring or complaining. They divided the funds among ABC causes, ABCRM causes, sister churches, religious and social organizations, even retired ministers who were facing severe health and financial problems. They were simply good stewards of what had been passed on to them. They were both cheerful receivers and cheerful givers. I have never seen a congregation that so clearly saw their place in the history of their church. Because of their stewardship, the ministry of Church of the Master, which dissolved at the end of 2008, will continue long beyond the sale of their church property.

As I think about these events in the life of a sister congregation, in a moment of candor and as an outside sets of eyes, I need to say to you that together we must recognize the

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significance of these times. And I must point out that how this congregation responds to the challenges of the present will determine what happens down the road.

Let me meddle a little bit. I know that one of the debates in this congregation in recent years has to do with church property. James Park, even the building and property in which we worship on this day, are important financial assets. With decline in membership and at the same time resources, one of the options has been to cash in on the resources. Do we sell, do we stay, do we go? What do we do in a time such as this? These are painful discussions. Our property and our building hold pleasant memories for most of us here this morning. It is hard to give up on the past. It is difficult to know what to do for the future. I wish I had the answers, but I don't. Besides, I don't want to experience the agony and sometimes anger that comes from such debates.

But let me say candidly to you, decisions made beginning today and in the months ahead are absolutely essential in determining what happens in regards to this congregation. If the wrong decisions are made, then this church may well find itself having to reconsider the discussions about property and possessions in the years ahead in the not too distant future. And it won't be because you want to but because you have to face the situation. Budget considerations are such a determining factor in what will happen here, or anywhere else. This is no mystery and should come as no surprise to any of us!

The Pastoral Search Committee, which has worked harder and with more commitment to doing its work well than any such committee that I have known, realizes without being reminded what an important task it has, and how it must do it right. There will be no do-overs in the calling of the next pastor. The calling of the pastor is the most important decision ahead for FBC, Boulder.

I say all of this not to scare you, or discourage you, but to encourage you. If you respond with commitment and even sacrificial giving, then you will enhance the opportunity to get this right, and the opportunity to redirect the history of this congregation. It really is in your hands. The Search Committee is depending upon you to give direction in terms of what can be done when structuring a financial package for a new pastor. We don't like to talk about these things, but the reality is before us. And we must understand that reality, and respond to it.

So, I say to you who are servants of God through Jesus of Nazareth, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" How you answer those questions will determine the future of First Baptist Church. You are wearing the mantle that has been passed on to you. Those who came before you are gone. There is some character who shows up at golf tournaments, and immediately after a well-known player hits a drive shouts out "You da Man!" He bugs me, but that is irrelevant. But when it comes to this church and its future "You da man; you da woman; you da people!" It is all on your shoulders.

Conclusion:

So what can we learn today on this Sunday of commitment? First, we can learn that stewardship goes far beyond dollars and cents. Stewardship involves giving and using our talents and experiences in service to God and through this congregation. We have had a number of people give witness to such efforts by so many who have come before us, and many who even today are a part of this church. Volunteerism is alive and well at FBC, and it always has been. And it always must be so.

This church shall continue to need those who teach, those who minister, those who care for the grounds and the building, those who serve as a conduit to the community and to its needs, those who help with the tasks of the office, and on and on and on. The forms which you have been asked to fill out emphasize the commitment to the things that you know that you can do, and are willing to do. When we volunteer to do something very hard, and when we succeed, it is so satisfying and so rewarding.

And this church needs and will continue to need those who are willing to commit to the financial support of the ministry of this church. It is easy for a minister to say at a time like this to do what you can, to commit with the realization that your circumstances may change and you will need to revise your intentions. But I say unto you on this day, your support is not only important, but it is *essential*. And it is vital that this church believes that it can move forward, that it can move ahead. Hesitancy is not what is needed. Resiliency and determination are needed. The support of a pastor, the continuance of an outstanding music ministry, and the commitment to mission and ministry will take money. And that money will come from you. There is no "stimulus package" for the future of this congregation unless it comes from you.

Story of Flip Wilson and Rev. Leroy, pastor of the Church of What's Happening Now! "If this church is going to move forward, it's got to get down on its knees and crawl. A voice from the congregation responds "Let it crawl, Rev., let it crawl!" And if this church is is going to do its work as it should, it has to get up off its knees and it has to walk!" Again the voice, "Let it walk, Rev., let it walk!" "And if this church is going to succeed and be a great force in this community and the world, it has to run!" "Let it run, Rev, let it run!" "The Rev. Leroy says "And if this church is going to run, it's got to have money!" A silent pause, and then the voice once more "Let it crawl, Rev., let it crawl."

Well, I believe that FBC of Boulder is ready to run. The spirit is really good, unity is at a high level, volunteerism is a wonderful virtue these days, and hopes are high." We are ready to run and none of us want it to crawl. So, let's commit ourselves this morning to doing whatever it takes to be ready and eager when new leadership shows up. We owe it to the past, and we owe it to the future. We owe it to God, and we owe it to ourselves.

So, on this day let us hear anew the question to Hagar in light of FBC, Boulder: "Where have we come from and where are we going?" The way that we answer this will be both a

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reminder to our past and all of the commitment and sacrifice by those upon whose shoulders we stand, and it will be our commitment to the challenge to respond sacrificially and maybe even heroically in the days ahead. We are the ones who must and will answer these questions.

As I prepared this sermon I was reminded of a bumper sticker that I saw a few years ago. It said, "We have inherited the earth from our children!" As I thought about this I was reminded that just about everything we have today, we have inherited from those who came before us. We are simply stewards of what has been passed to us from the previous 137 years. But in another sense, what we do today is a gift from the future. Those who follow us have given us the task of working, serving, giving, ministering, proclaiming, and converting the world around us. They have placed in our hands an inheritance from their generation which we can either squander, or we can build upon.

So the question of the past, and the question of the future, in reality must be answered in the present. What we do today must honor the labors of those who came before us. And what the future holds rests in our commitment and our dedication in so many different areas. What I am saying to you is not a call for a casual or flippant response, but a call for a genuine commitment to be and to give our very best.

Thus, the answer to the questions to Hagar for our generation will be answered right now. By this congregation, collectively. And the answer rests in our hands. Together. For we are a debtor to the past and to the future.