

Who's In The House?

Hebrews 3:1-6, Numbers 12:1-9

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

March 11, 2007

Pastor Dave Carver

Hmmm. That's a good question. "What's the best sermon I ever heard?" That's a hard question, you know? I mean, you hear so many, and you think that you're really processing them, but by the time you're on the closing hymn, you can't quite remember much except the opening joke or the illustration that made you want to cry. Best sermon ever?

I remember a day – I don't know if this was the best sermon I've ever heard, but I can tell you, the preacher had us that day. I mean, he was "on", if you know what I mean. It's interesting to think about that day, because as I remember, times were not all that great for the congregation then. I mean, most of the folks in church were getting by, but barely. Seemed like everyone was either remembering the good job they used to have or getting ready for the next big break...but in the meantime, not very many people had much money. Let's just say that when we got together for pot-luck suppers in those days, there was a lot of macaroni, if you know what I mean...

Anyway, the preacher had been talking about Jesus for a while. People were discouraged – now, I don't want to make it sound like our folks were really hoping for a kind of a super-hero or anything, but, well, I think I can be honest and tell you that there was a kind of a feeling that Jesus had sort of let us down. People were discouraged? Or maybe troubled – some of the folks were thinking that Jesus had been sort of a wimp...you know, a victim. That he just rolled over and died when he could have used some of that power to set things straight.

And the preacher, God bless him, did a great job at reminding us that Jesus was the son of God. There were a couple of folks in the congregation that were all into angels and supernatural forces, and the preacher spent some time proving in all kinds of ways that Jesus, as the son of God, was superior to any angel. He did a good job.

But the day that I'm talking about, he had left the angels behind and he brought out Moses. He wanted us to compare Jesus and Moses. Now, in one way, that's a hard question – it's almost like asking, "Who's the better ball player, Ty Cobb or Nolan Ryan? Roberto Clemente or Ted Williams?" I mean, how do you answer a question like that, when you are comparing people from such different eras and, well, different worlds?

While we were still kind of mulling that over, he went on to build his argument by using the example of a house. He did it by using the word "house" in a couple of different ways. That was one thing about that preacher – he used words the way that an artist used colors. I mean, he could paint a picture just by talking, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, he said, “Look at a house. Which is better – to be the main beam in the house, or to be the designer who figured out where the main beam needed to go? It’s the same way with Jesus and Moses. I’m not going to lie to you, Moses was important in the house. He’s the main joist holding up the place. But Jesus was the one who designed the house, and who put Moses where he needed to be.” I liked that – it got me thinking.

But while I was still turning over that notion of the word “house”, he flipped the word around, and was using the word “house” like a family, or a dynasty. “If you want to look at the house this way,” the preacher said, “then Moses is the hired man who you trust with everything, but Jesus is the son who really owns the place.”

And if he’d have stopped there, it would have been a good sermon, and I might have even remembered it. Face it – I’d grown up thinking that whatever God was doing in the world, Moses had gotten it started. The old man really helped me to see that Moses was sent to prepare the way for Jesus, who was really the definitive statement about what God’s intentions are. The preacher said that was “Christology” – a fancy word for what you believe about Jesus. And, like I said, it was a pretty good sermon. I probably would have remembered it for a while.

But it’s what he said next that got me thinking in a way that hasn’t let up. He went on to use the “house” analogy one more time. Only this time, he said that WE were the house!

I knew that sometimes the preacher was prone to teasing, and I almost laughed out loud when he said that we were the house that God building. That everything that the angels, that Moses and that Jesus were doing was pointing to us.

I still remember the exact words that he used. How often can you say THAT about a sermon? Anyway, he said, “We are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.”

He couldn’t have chosen a more ironic moment or a more ironic group of people. We were poor, meeting in a place with a chronically leaky roof. There were two or three folks that were always infighting and gossiping about each other. And, like I said, we were just worn out. But he looked us square in the eyes and said, “We are his house if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope.”

I’m not sure if you get this, but the word “confidence” there? In Greek, it’s *παρρησιαν* – and it means more than how a person *feels*; it gets to the way a person speaks or even walks – it’s like sporting an attitude. And when he put that with the word *καυχημα*, which can be translated as “pride” or, even better, “boasting”, there was no mistaking his meaning: that no matter what we felt like in ourselves, we had better be ready to talk and dream big. How could we do that? Because of the last word of the sermon: hope.

We could boast, we could have pride, we could be strong...not because of what we were about, but because we were the thing that God was doing. We were God's house. And God's house is a house built on hope.

And then I remembered the odd way that he started the message. He said to us, "Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share a heavenly call." At first, that had just sounded like preacher-talk to me. You know, like when they say, "In conclusion" and then go on for another half hour? I thought that was all just religious language to get himself revved up. But when I think about it, it was his core message. When he stood up there in the pulpit and looked us over, he didn't see a group of beaten-down, worn-out people who were either has-beens, never-wases, or not-yets. Sure, that's what we saw when we looked around the room.

But he saw people who were holy. That is to say, they were set apart. They didn't belong to the world. They didn't belong to their employers, or to their desires, or to their addictions, or to their relationships. They – we – belonged to God. That's what "holy" means. And that's how he saw us.

He said that we were brothers and sisters. Even us, who couldn't agree on a color for the carpeting in the ladies bathroom without gossiping about each other. Us, who seemed to live for our own little cliques and relationships...he said that we were all brothers and sisters in the same family.

And he said that this group of us who was holy and who was family also shared a heavenly calling. We weren't there because we didn't have anything better to do...we were there because God had something huge for us to do. In fact, we were the way in which this huge thing was going to get done. Imagine that! What nerve, to look at a roomful like we had that day and have the gall to say that we are what God is doing in the world. That the church, as God's house, is God's best and most hopeful word for the world.

I'm tempted now to look at your situation and to try to make an application. You know, to say, "so, if you are the church, you are holy brothers and sisters who share a heavenly calling, then that means that you should go out there and dofill in the blank." You know what I mean? I want to tell you that this means, obviously, that you should march for peace, or end hunger, or visit your sick neighbor, or be nice to that kid in school. But the problem is, anything that I could say now as an attempt to help you apply this learning from the preacher would limit it – as if being holy brothers and sisters sharing a heavenly calling means that all you have to do is bring peace, end hunger, and treat other people well. But aren't God's purposes bigger than that? I don't want to limit it.

So I will end my story with a challenge. When you go home, take some time to look in the mirror. Look yourself in the eyes. Look long enough to get past the feeling strange about it, or worrying about your complexion or your wrinkles. Look at who you are, my holy brother or sister who shares this calling with me. And say to yourself, "I am holy. I belong to a family that is doing God's business. That business begins here and now. I have hope, not in myself, but in

the one who made me, that I can do what he is sending me to do.” And keep looking. And then, looking yourself in the eye, say, “What’s first for today?”

Amen.