Building in Faith: Sing Barren Church

Oct. 2nd, 2022

**SLIDE 1: Title**

Today begins a new series: Building in Faith. We have just considered, in our previous series, what it takes to be a best friend to Jesus. We talked about Loyalty, shared mission, joy, self-sacrifice and trust. All these factors comprise a very real relationship with Jesus Christ, who calls you and I his friends. And as his friends we are members of his body, and his body takes the form of the church. And the church is all about building. Now we have to be careful here. I say the church is all about building, not a building.

**SLIDE 2: We are invested in the verb, not the noun**

We are invested in the verb, not the noun. We build up one another, be build up faith, we build relationships, be build up communities, but look around you now…we also build buildings. We pool together resources and give money toward projects and construct a space, a sort of home base, where we gather together in worship and from which we are sent out into this world to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The church is not a building, but the church does build.

This month, we are launching our Capital Campaign. It is just a fancy term for a fundraiser. We have a dream, a goal, a target and we want to build accordingly. We do not what to invest our money into the newest, biggest, greatest thing. We do not want to invest our money into what the church down the street is doing. We want to be faithful to God and to what he wants to do in us and through us. We want to build according to his plans for Forest Hills Church. And when God places an order, it is best for us to do everything in our power to fulfill said order.

**SLIDE 3: Campaign Logo**

Through much prayer, discernment, discussion and even a congregational survey, we feel that we have arrived at a God-ordained target, something God has ordered up for our church: an outdoor pavilion. A place out in our field that can be used for all kinds of ministries, events and get togethers. A place where people can find rest or stop to eat. A place that is inviting and useful for hosting. A pavilion certainly is a wonderful thing. It is also a very expensive thing.

Again, I want to be clear…a new pavilion is nice, it’s useful, it’s inviting, it’s practical and handy, but it is also unnecessary. Does God need a pavilion in order to do ministry here at Forest Hills church? No, he doesn’t. And will having a pavilion be the end-all-be-all of our ministry? No it won’t. Is there some sort of magic in having a pavilion our in our lawn? None whatsoever. But, for some reason, God does require us, his people.

**SLIDE 4: God does require us, his people.**

He has chosen to work through us, the church, the body of Christ. Did you know that God relies upon our obedience in order to operate in this world? He does not act without our involvement. Healings do not occur unless we speak a prayer over the illness. People are not saved unless we share the truth of the gospel. The hungry are not feed unless we package and distribute the food. God works wonders and miracles beyond all that we can ask or imagine, but he does it through the hands of feet of Jesus, aka you and me: the Church. It is both a great privilege and a heavy responsibility to be used by God. And as the Church, over the course of its existence, we have constructed buildings and organizations and schools and hospitals and orphanages and all kinds of places in which ministry is carried out and supported. Our pavilion is just that…an extension of our ministry here at Forest Hills.

Our theme that drives this entire campaign comes from Isaiah 54. I want to turn to it now and read through the first few verses. READ.

**SLIDE 5:** **Sing, barren woman who has borne no child; break forth into singing and cry out, you who were never in labor, for the children of the wife who has been deserted will be more numerous than the children of the married, says the Lord. Enlarge the site of your tent, and stretch out the drapes of your dwellings; don’t hold back. Lengthen your tent ropes and strengthen your stakes. To the right and to the left you will burst out, and your children will possess the nations’ land and settle their desolate cities. Isaiah 54:1-3**

Now, Isaiah is a prophet, which means he was someone who spoke God’s words to God’s people. Isaiah was a mouthpiece for the Lord. But his book can be challenging for us to read because he was speaking God’s word to a specific audience in a specific time in history. So I want to provide some of that context so we as modern readers can get on the same page. But before we get to the biblical context, I want to also provide some current cultural context.

Every church has a context within which it exists. Forest Hills Church finds itself in Forest Lake as part of the Minnesota Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. That is our immediate context and being familiar with a few facts regarding that context can be very helpful. To do the best ministry we can, we want to know about our community. Who lives in Forest Lake? What do they care about? What do they need? How can we best share Jesus with them? The same is true with our denominational ties. Knowing about the United Methodist Church helps us understand who we are. What is our history? What drives us as a church? What is the current state of our church?

I want to share with you some unvarnished information. I want you to be aware of what is currently happening in our state and world when it comes to the work of the church.

**SLIDE 6: Statistics**

Here are some overall statistics from Lifeway Research: 63% of Americans identify as Christian…so we might celebrate that we are in the majority…but just 14 years ago that number was 78%. That is a 15 point drop in 14 years. Virtually all churches have reconvened since Covid 19 shut everything down, yet only about 73% of attendees have returned, and the largest demographic to stay home is not the susceptible senior population, it is the young adults, 36% of whom, attended pre-pandemic…now only 25% attended church. These are some older numbers now but they do highlight a concerning trend: In America, over a ten year period from 2000-2010, membership in the United Methodist Church dropped 16.6%, and in Minnesota we have gone from 355 total churches to 341…with around 32% identified as “highly vital”.

It’s not a pretty picture. One’s first impulse is to try to spin the numbers or at least find a silver lining. One stat that is personally disturbing to me is the fact the only 39% of Americans see pastors as honest. And only 37% have confidence in the church. This means that many Christians and church members fall into these groups.

**SLIDE 7: Chemistry Test Loophole**

One response to all of this is what I call the “Chemistry Test Loophole” One day, I asked my oldest about how he did on his chemistry test. His response was less than stellar. “But,” he said, “All the kids did poorly.” The Chemistry Test Loophole is the impulse in us to justify our shortcomings because compared to everyone else…we’re normal. We’re not doing that bad. We stack up with everyone else. If we look at all these trends, we see their reality in our personal context don’t we? If we are honest, our church is not full of young people. Our church is still dealing with pandemic fallout. Our church is…normal. We are doing about as well as everyone else. Now if an entire class does poorly on a test, that may be a reflection of a bad teacher. But could we possibly say that we have had a bad teacher? It could be that we have been listening to the wrong teacher, but if we claim Jesus as our teacher, then the blame must fall on us. Maybe we don’t grasp the concepts, maybe we have not studied as we ought to have, maybe we just lose focus on test day. Whatever the case may be, I do not want to accept what is normal as good enough. The church is up against it in this culture. Christianity is losing ground, losing clout and losing influence. The church is the barren woman that Isaiah describes. Ah, but hope! That is not the end of the story!

**SLIDE 8: That is not the end of the story!**

It’s important to know that Isaiah lived in Jerusalem and worked pretty closely with the kings of Judah, specifically king Ahaz and Hezekiah. His overall message was one of warning. He proclaimed that judgment would come from God in the form of Assyria and Babylon. These nations would destroy Judah because of their unfaithfulness to God. But amidst all the bad news, Isaiah is also full of hope. He repeats this idea of a new Jerusalem and the coming of a king from David’s line who we now know as Jesus. Isaiah’s book needs to be seen in two parts. Part one covers oracles of judgment and hope for Jerusalem, for other nations but ultimately he speaks of the fall of Jerusalem which did indeed occur about 100 years after Isaiah’s death. This then ushers in the exile where God’s people were taken from their promised land and scattered throughout Babylon and other nations.

**SLIDE 9: Isaiah 40:1-2**

Now we get to Isaiah II. Part II begins in chapter 40. If you could turn there now I want to note a few things. Chapter 40 verse 1, God says, “Comfort, comfort my people!...Speak compassion to Jerusalem…her penalty has been paid.” Now remember these are words for people in exile…and exile that will not occur for 100 years! This is what makes Isaiah such a tough book for us to read today. Isaiah is speaking authoritatively about an event that has yet to happen. So Isaiah’s targeted audience seems to change from Judeans in the 8th century BC to a post-exilic people. He is sharing God’s words to God’s people but in a different time…It is very strange, but I think on of the reasons for this shift is to cement Isaiah as beyond a doubt a true and faithful prophet of God. Because, as we will see, Isaiah has much to say about a coming servant, a Suffering Servant, again we know him as Jesus. So God’s people in exile will read the old, old words of Isaiah that are actually written to them. They will trust these words because they are living a reality that Isaiah had already predicted would occur. So now, they can truly trust in the words of this prophet. They can receive these words of comfort from a source that has already proven to be trustworthy and true. And, more than that, they can also trust in the yet future events that will be described.

So chapter 40 begins with comfort. Chapter 42 begins to describe God’s servant. Chapter 43 the people are told not to fear and to forget the former things because God is doing something new! Chapter 45, God chooses King Cyrus, a pagan ruler, to carry out his divine will and allow the people to return home. An event that sounds absolutely crazy, and yet can be trusted because it comes from Isaiah. We then hear even more about God’s Suffering Servant and the description culminates in chapter 53: this Servant will be despised, crushed, pierced for our sins. He will be like a lamb led to the slaughter. Isaiah says that the Lord’s plans will come to fruition through this Servant. It’s a declaration of Jesus! We know that now, but they had to believe it then.

**SLIDE 10: Isaiah 54**

Now we get to our chapter, 54. Because of the reality of this Suffering Servant, because sins have been forgiven and punishment has been taken on our behalf, we are to break forth into singing! Though we are barren, the children will come! So enlarge your tents! Don’t hold back! To the right and to the left you will burst out! These statements seem unbelievable. Just like they did to the original audience. But consider the source. Isaiah is a prophet of God. He speaks the words of God. He has been vindicated. He has literally stood the test of time, the test of time travel in a sense. This are not words to throw away. They are God’s promise to God’s people. Barrenness is not our destiny. Barrenness is not something to tolerate or get used to. It is not the new normal. It is not “just the way things are.” Children are coming says the Lord. It’s not my words. It’s not some idea that has come down from the conference. It was written down for us almost 4,000 years ago! Is it trustworthy? Is it true? Are we God’s people? Is His word for us? We are a church in exile. And we are here because we have set aside our first love. We have compromised with the false gods of this world. We have lost our reason for being. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement wrote, “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist whether in Europe or America. But I am afraid lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this will undoubtedly be the case, unless they hold fast both the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.” We take a long hard look at ourselves and we come before God asking him to remove what is impure from us and pleading for the Holy Spirit to move and work in us. Apart from God, Forest Hills Church will fade away. Every church will…so we must cling to him for our very lives. And when we do, we hear these words: comfort…barrenness will end…children will come…enlarge your tents! Don’t hold back!

**SLIDE 11: Build in Faith**

And so we build in faith. We pray earnestly in faith. We give money in faith. We tell others about Jesus in faith. We cling to God in faith, and we live lives that are faithful. Amen.