

## SERMON: “Take Courage ... Take Courage ... Take Courage”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, January 30, 2022

*PRAYER: “May your Word continue to confirm the commitment, inspire the ministry and mission of the people who praise you in this congregation and serve you in and out of this congregation. And may your Spirit move among us all giving rise to imagination and fresh vision as you call and guide your church into the future you, our God, have in mind.” Amen*

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The house in which I spent most of my growing-up years was a three-storey brick structure with a basement.

When my family first moved in the basement extended underneath the front porch, which afforded my father a wonderful workshop for his avocation as a carpenter.

The rest of the unfinished basement boasted a laundry tub, a wringer-washer, a freezer, and a sprawling coal furnace with back corner coal bin and storage.

After several years the coal furnace and coal room got replaced by a slimmer gas furnace.

That opened up space for what was to be a family room, but turned to be more of a sewing room for my mother.

The main floor of the house remained pretty much unchanged except for new hall closets.

There were three bedrooms on the second floor and a bathroom.

My parents had one bedroom, my older sister had another, and I had the third one.

My older brother had a mocked up room in half of the upstairs attic.

By the time my older brother and sister had moved out on their own,

I had a younger sister, and then, a younger brother.

Bedrooms were reconfigured. My younger sister got my older sister’s former room.

My younger brother would get my room. And I, I would get the whole attic space for myself!

The backyard when we moved in boasted gardens, lawn, and a summer house in the corner beneath a huge weeping willow tree.

During our last five or six years as tenants in that house, the summer house and willow tree made way for an above ground pool that also meant opening up the back porch as a deck.

During the whole time we lived in that house there was only ever one bathroom.

I fully suspect the next owners added at least a second bathroom somewhere within.

### THE EVOLUTION OF GOD’S HOUSE

God’s house, or places where people experience the presence of the Holy One, has always undergone various reconfigurations and repurposing of spaces.

A quick survey of “house of God” variations among the ancient Hebrew peoples bears that out.

In their beginnings as tribal peoples there was just an assortment of outdoor altars, shrines, and sacred groves; no fixed structure. That continued during their days of slavery in Egypt.

The Exodus generation of Hebrews freed from slavery would develop a portable “house of God” known as the tent of meeting in which the ark of the covenant box held central space.

As that people of God progressively occupied the Promised Land, God's presence remained in that movable tent for about three hundred years up to the reign of King David. David wanted to build a more permanent structure, but God denied him that opportunity. His successor Solomon got to take on that project. His great Temple was an architectural masterpiece and wonder in the midst of Jerusalem. It stood there long after he died for well over 300 years until the armies of Babylon destroyed it along with the rest of the habitations of Israel. Most of her citizens were carted off into a time of Exile that lasted about fifty years until Persia became the new dominant Empire in the ancient Near East and they were aloud to return home. Many of them had been born and raised in Exile and had no personal memory of the land they used to inhabit. The task of restoring and rebuilding their homeland and also reconstituting themselves as a people of faith was guided by Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, as governor and Joshua, son of Jehozadak as high priest. Divine direction and nudging also came through two prophetic messengers, Zechariah and Haggai. Now there are some biblical names I haven't heard anyone bestow upon their children: Joshua, yes, occasionally Zechariah (Zachary), but Haggai, Zerubbabel, Shealtiel, Jehozadak? What would their shortened nicknames be? Hag? Bub? Sheal? And "Hey, Jeho!"? One major objective in that great restoration enterprise was to rebuild the great Temple. During the first three years of their return, from 538 to 535 BCE, the foundations were laid. Somehow, for a variety of reasons, that work was disrupted and halted for 15 to 20 years, so that it would take until 516-515 BCE for the second Temple to be in place. It would begin as a much more modest version of the original Temple that was built during the rule of Solomon, but it was still impressive. Haggai cheered that project on with his messages, the heart of which sounded like this: *"Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? ... Take courage ... take courage ... take courage ... work, for I am with you. I will fill this house with splendour .... The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says your God."* (cf. Haggai 2:3-9) In the next century, the fifth century, further enhancements of rebuilt community life were overseen by Nehemiah, as governor, and Ezra, as High Priest. Expanded and repurposed Temple space would also happen during their time. The empires that replaced Persia made the Israelites subject peoples again. The Temple still stood, but suffered sacrilegious and abominations within its walls until Rome installed Herod the Great as tetrarch in Palestine at the turn of the ages. Herod loved building projects and managed to not only purify the Temple but also oversee its fullest expansion and embellishment. In 70 CE, while quashing a Jewish revolt, the Roman armies destroyed that Temple. The Wailing Wall, or Western Wall, is the only remaining part of it still standing today. The connecting thread woven through all this ancient history is that the "house of God" has always undergone adaptation, transition, and evolution.

Which is certainly also true, if we trace the history of the Christian “church”. In the midst of the short-lived glory of the Second Temple, along came Jesus. He set in motion another vision and version of faith lived out in community. The “*ecclesia*” it would be called in Greek, a community of people “called out” to re-present God’s grace and transforming power at work in the world. The would start out as an often prohibited underground movement meeting in caves and houses in small groups until in more safe and stable times for them, they too would get into constructing “houses of God” or church structures. They would take multiple forms covering the range of woodland outdoor chapels to magnificent cathedrals, basilicas, a multi-use church complexes scattered all over the face of the earth from that very first century CE until now. Throughout the ages, what we know as “church” has been in flux, ever evolving, re-forming, undergoing reconstruction and reformulation. In recent years there has been no end of evocative, sometimes provocative books, seminars, and conferences on the subject of ecclesiology (how we understand “church”) Beginning perhaps with Loren Mead’s 1991 “The Once and Future Church” and on through “Renewing the Church in a Secular Age” (edited by Charles Taylor *et al*); and, “Liberating Hope: Daring to Renew the Mainline Church” (Michael Piazza, Cameron Trimble). All of them lift up an evolving sense of not only how we define “church”, but also how we design and realign “church”. The manner in which people of faith form and act in community to serve God’s purposes has always been in flux.

### III TAKE COURAGE, FIRST UNITED

First United, Waterloo: you have been, still are, and will continue to be part of that process of evolution.

*“Take courage ... take courage ... take courage. Work ... (serve on in ministry and mission) for I am with you says your God”.*

You are right on the verge of figuring that out once more.

Asset-mapping is part of a process of discerning how God is calling you to be the church here and now and for the next while ahead.

It is an invitation to imagine, envision how to build relationships, live God’s transforming love by refocusing and redirecting some, if not a good deal, of your personal gifts for ministry and mission, re-purposing and altering your church space, and finding and working with partners who can help you do that.

You are not alone, and other congregations elsewhere have already been engaged in that.

Already, some of the dreamers among you have been busy imagining:

visions such as reconfiguring the sanctuary as a concert-hall, and multi-purpose gathering space, or redeveloping a portion of the space you occupy for seniors’ and/or affordable housing, or sharing space with other organizations, even city hall, to become a community hub.

That’s a longer-term, more distant future outlook, but let’s dare to visualize it.

[Slide of First United to which is added: Tourist Office, Affordable Housing tower, and re-purposed sanctuary and interior spaces]  
 Locally, you have St. John's Anglican who have already gone that route.  
 Trinity United, Elmira is in the midst of a similar transition.  
 Their way may not be the way for which you opt.  
 As for now, what are some of the short-term options, smaller adjustments and moves that might be possible?  
 Perhaps some ideas from other churches will prime your pumps for re-imagining.  
 In one congregation I served recently, they opted to redesign their church parlour space into a more contemporary gathering and meeting space.  
 It went from this [Slide] to this .... [Slides] new flooring, doors, pub-style tables and chairs, a large screen TV with internet connectivity, and an open coffee, refreshment bar.  
 Another congregation recently replaced their quaint white picket fence front yard [Slide] with a community friendly conversation area and native plant gardens. [Slide]  
 A few decades ago, a group of churches in a small Ontario city worked together to buy the former nurses' residence of the local hospital and turn it into "The Shepherd's Centre" which is a five-to-six-day-a-week gathering space for seniors activities and rental office spaces on the upper levels. [Sample slide]  
 Among the activities offered are board games, card games, discussion groups on "the news", a former high-school Classics teacher offered "A Peek Into Greek", line-dancing, etc.  
 The most popular activity however turned out to be foot care pedicures offered twice a week. You wouldn't have to build or share in a separate facility to offer seniors' programming and activities that aren't offered elsewhere, or similar opportunities for people with mental illness. Just some thoughts in hopes of stimulating your dreaming and re-visioning.

### III WHAT NEXT?

What's really going to happen next? Your hunches and inklings are as good as mine.  
 In his appeal for imaginative and engaging preaching in a church under reconstruction, Tom Troeger begins with a poem about a church suffering a seismic shock.  
 The shock is strong enough to blow out the Rose window and parts the wall around it leaving what he refers to as "*a God-shaped hole*".  
 He then reaches back through the history of the Christian church to highlight poets, musicians, pastors, and others who gave inspiration and hope to a church in their own time that was under pressure: reform or become irrelevant.  
 It's about imagination and adaptability, about tuning into what he refers to as "the polyphonic Spirit of God". *I*  
 I believe we are aware of that already.  
 It invites churches now to embrace multiculturalism not only musically but also within their own sense of broadened and more inclusive community.

It recognizes that all around us demographics are changing,  
that technologically now, the world is indeed our parish,  
that there are many spiritually hungry souls searching for connection with the Divine,  
that partnering with other communities of faith and social service agencies will be the norm,  
that the church may yet be one helpful source of nurturing moral and social consciousness.  
So, even if in the not-too-distant future hymnody, sermons, pews, organs, and stained glass  
become *passé*, there will still be faith communities in forms that offer hope and help and care.  
*"Take courage.... Take courage.... Take courage. Work, for your God will be with you."*  
Reconfiguring, reconstructing, the very facilities out of which we minister  
is part of adapting to a culture and world also in transition.  
The structures we call "churches" can be much more than only shrines or houses of God.  
To can be more like a base of operations, a hub for community development and service,  
way stations for all who undertake this life journey called faith.  
Hey, First United, you have already been making adaptations in recent years,  
I feel quite confident that God has a vision for you newer, venturesome future  
as you endeavour to live out your core values  
and your purpose of building relationships, living God's transforming love.  
Bravo! *"Take courage.... Take courage.... Take courage....*  
*Work. Keep on redesigning, reformulating what it is to be engaged in ministry and mission.*  
*For I am with you, says your God...."*  
And quite probably, *"The latter splendour of this house will be greater than the former."*

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*I Tom Troeger, Preaching While the Church is Under Reconstruction, (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN: 1999), pages 152-153 and ff.*