

“A Place With A Purpose”

Dear Friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus as we gather to worship and to give thanks and to dedicate this building to the work and the glory of God.

What a wonderful day this is for us as a congregation. (We finally made it!) It's a day to celebrate. It's a day to give thanks. It's a day to remember who we are and why we are here and what it is God has called and chosen us to be about.

This is a project, (if you turn back the clock), that has been in front of us for going on nearly five years. From the time we first began talking about doing something with our worship space, to the development of a vision, to the designs and revisions, to the plan carried out, to the final inspections we received only this past week, this day has been a long time in coming.

And it hasn't happened by itself. It has taken (as I think we all know) many faithful and dedicated people to pull it off. From our Strategic Planning Team, to our Church Council, to our Sanctuary Enhancement Team, to our architect, to our General Contractor, to the many who volunteered their time, gave their financial support, offered their prayers throughout.

And to think that it all began with a vision! A 2020 vision! A vision that began in the heart and the mind of God and a vision (through the power of the Holy Spirit) that was passed on and given to us.

The theme we've been using for these first three years (of our vision) comes from the story of Peter being called by Jesus to step out of the boat and onto the water and to walk toward Him. “Led by a Vision: Stepping Out in Faith.” That's what we've been doing. (That's what we are doing.) We're stepping out in faith. We're following a vision that we believe has been given to us by God.

Now, we didn't read that story today. But (if you remember) it wasn't a calm day. (And it's hard enough to walk on water when it's calm.) But it wasn't. It was in the midst of a storm. There was wind and there were waves and there was weather.

I'll be honest with you. When this effort began and we started this three-year campaign, I had times when I wondered about the timing (of this whole thing) and about the wisdom of doing this project when the economy was falling apart. (And I know I wasn't alone.) There were others who were asking the same things.

The housing market was dropping. Unemployment was on the rise. Stocks were falling. And for the first time in the past 20 years (this past month), we even sent out a letter asking for increased support.

In some ways, you might say that this was the worst possible time (for this effort), the perfect financial storm. But it all depends on the goal you're trying to reach and the purpose behind what we're trying to accomplish.

Because if the goal was to raise money, then it wasn't a good time at all. If the purpose was to put up a building, then the wisdom would be hard to find. But go back to the theme. And think about what we're doing (what God is doing).

“Led by a Vision: Stepping Out in Faith.” Do you know what my prayer was during the campaign that led to this project? It wasn't that we'd raise enough money (to pull it off). It wasn't that the building efforts would become a success. My prayer was that God would lead us (with His vision) and that in the process of following, we would grow in faith.

Do you know what I think? I think this was the best possible time to remodel. I think that this was the perfect faith-building storm. Because it pushed our faith. It required us to trust. And it forced us (even as the financial winds and waves and weather continued to blow) to fix our eyes on Jesus and to get out of the boat.

“A Place With A Purpose.” Let's talk for a few moments about this place. (You learn a lot about a place in the midst of construction.) You learn a lot about the priorities of the people in a place when you enter into a project like this.

As far as this place (is concerned), let me say a bit about some of the things we now have in place. And some of them are obvious and some are not.

For starters, we now have air conditioning. (We're using it here this morning.) Now, that's not something we're going to need on most days. But on those days when we do, it will certainly help us stay focused on our worship.

We also have a new fire alarm system. (Now, that wasn't entirely by choice, but it's a good thing.) You'll see fire alarm lights and extinguishers and pull stations around the building. And those little handles that say "pull?" Don't do it, unless there's a fire!

And do you see those two things on the front wall (at the top of the white walls) that look like reflectors? They're part of the smoke detection system. They reflect an infrared beam (from those little white and black boxes on the back walls) and they trigger the alarm to go off whenever smoke hits the beam.

In the narthex, (the entryway), it's not a cry room. We decided against having a dedicated space (just for that). But we've set up some chairs, put down an area rug, and there is now sound in the narthex, so you can hear what's going on when you walk out. (So for those of you who used to walk out to get away during the sermon, it's not going to work! There is no longer anywhere to hide!)

And we have a new sacristy. If you get a chance after the service, walk back there and take a look. It's nothing fancy, but it's new and it's nice. And we have new hanging lights over the main part of the sanctuary, and new recessed lighting in the aisles and up front. And we have a new organ and we have a new sound system, (and we'll be recognizing them a bit later), and we have new flooring under the pews, and we have new carpet.

Now, I know the whole replacement of the carpet thing became something of a joke as it came down to the end. (And for some of you, you were more than ready to make the switch.) But for those who weren't quite yet ready to say goodbye (to the old carpet), I have a surprise for you. (We hung onto a number of small pieces.) Do you know where they are? They're under the hymnals and the Bibles (in the pews). There's a piece of the old carpet to keep the books from banging. (And so it's just like a wedding: "something old, something new!")

We also made a number of repairs to an old roof. Do you see those two skylights (over the altar)? The one on your left (as it turned out) had probably been leaking since the day it was first installed in 1974. The water had been running down one of the smaller beams and onto one of the main support beams. When we found it, after cutting back those old soffits, (remember the big overhangs in the front on both sides), we found that one of the main support beams had rotted more than halfway through. And so obviously we repaired it and checked for more damage and fixed it up.

And last (but certainly not least), we have refinished pews and we now have cushions. I hope you enjoy them. (They were a special gift.) And they add a nice finishing touch. But (everybody look up here for a minute). Here's the deal. We're giving the ushers some of those long poles (and if you start sleeping), they'll start poking. And if that doesn't work, we're pulling them out! (You think I'm kidding.)

"A Place With A Purpose." Now, those are just a few of the things about this place worth mentioning. Let's talk about the priorities we had (for this place) right from the start.

I believe it was Winston Churchill who said that "We shape our buildings, and then our buildings shape us." (And I believe he was right.) And that's why in the process of developing a plan, we were careful in making sure that the building designs were consistent with the purposes we sought to fulfill through them.

In the architectural trade they talk about "form following function." Right from the start, we made it clear to our architect the function we had in mind, the purposes we sought to fulfill through them, and the form of the building soon followed.

Three priorities we had in mind. One, we wanted the cross to remain central. And it has. In fact, I believe it stands out more today (in this new design) than it ever has. It's prominent in its position. There are five lights that help bring it into focus. You can't walk into this building and miss the cross. You can't come here to worship and fail to grasp the place and position it holds.

My prayer is (and not only for us here today) but for all who enter this building in the years to come, that that cross would serve not only as a remembrance of what Jesus did for us, but also as a reminder of how we are called to live.

We are people of the cross. We are followers of the one crucified. And the form we're to take, the function of our lives (as we make our way through life) is shaped by the cross of the One who gave His life for us.

One, we wanted the cross to be central in our place of worship. Two, we wanted to provide space for our worship leaders, and to enhance this space to support the variety of worship styles we offer. (And I believe we've done what we set out to do.)

Now, if you remember our vision, you remember that it's not only a broad vision (for between now and the year 2020), of what we believe God is calling us to do (in these next years). But it's also broken down into smaller pieces that help us move forward in more specific ways.

Three of the fifteen points in our vision (for what we see for St. Timothy's in the year 2020) have to do with our worship. And all three have to do with growth and opportunity and reaching out beyond ourselves with the message of Jesus Christ.

My friends, on this day of dedication, let's not forget why we did this (in the first place). This enhancement isn't about us and about what we have done and what we want for our worship. It's about God and about what He has done (and is doing) in Jesus, and about what He wants for the world He came to save.

Now, we have a new worship space and it's beautiful and I know we're going to enjoy it when we're here. (And we need to be here.) You need to be here (every week). It's a part of the commitment we make when we join a church. It's a part of the calling we've been given when we were chosen in Christ.

But the truth is that a church building isn't worth building unless it's used for building. (Did you hear that?) A church building isn't worth building unless it's used for building.

Living stones! That's what Jesus calls us. And that's what He's using to build His Church. This is not a bricks and mortar thing. If that's all it is, then we're done. It's over. We're finished. And let's all go home and pat ourselves on the back, and say "Way to go! (if that's all it is)."

But that's not all it is. (It's not about buildings), it's about people. It's about telling the world about Jesus. And it's about the raising up of living stones who will become the church and the body of Jesus Christ.

The cross is central (in this new place of worship). We now have a place to grow and to reach out (in a variety of ways). And (priority #3) the Word of God is front and center in what we do.

In fact, when I first saw it (this new pulpit), I was impressed. You walk in and (look at the pulpit) and say "Wow!" It is impressive. It makes a strong and a bold statement. The Word of God matters in this place. The Word of God is not peripheral in this place. You look at it and you say "Wow!" (And then one of the three of us stand in it and you say "Whoa?!?")

But (my friends) it doesn't matter who stands in it. (And that's the point.) What matters is what stands behind it. If this pulpit has any authority at all, it's an authority that comes from the Word of God. It's the Word of God that gives this pulpit its authority. It's the "Thus says the Lord!" that comes from it that makes it worth paying attention.

Now, I don't want this to become anything more than it is, but I'd like to make a little presentation. And I'm not doing this (in any way) as a joke, nor to embarrass the one to whom it's being presented.

But I have a piece of the old carpet (hold up carpet) that I'm going to give to my father after the services this morning. It's a piece of carpet that was taken from where he stood for many years (in the old pulpit) as he preached the Word of God. (In fact, just for fun, I tried to figure out how many sermons he had preached on this particular piece of carpet. And my best guess is that it must have been close to 1300.)

Do you know what that makes this? It makes it "holy ground." It's a place where (from 1974, when it was first installed, until 1986 when he retired, and now until 2009, when it was finally replaced), a place where the Word of God was preached and the promises of God proclaimed. And lives were changed. And the kingdom of God was built. And all to the glory of Jesus.

My prayer for this new pulpit is nothing less. I pray that this new pulpit would serve the same purposes as the old, and that no matter who stands in it, that he or she would find their authority in the Word of God. "Thus says the Lord. Your sins are forgiven. Your life belongs to God. And there is hope and promise (for your life) in Jesus Christ."

“A Place With A Purpose.” Let me close today with two stories. The first is the story (from back in 1957) of a congregation in Sarasota, Florida that was breaking ground for their new sanctuary. (This isn’t a groundbreaking here today. It’s a dedication.) But this congregation was breaking ground.

And what they did, instead of bringing in a few shovels for a few special people to use, they brought in an old one-horse plow. And recalling the words of Jesus, “To take my yoke upon you,” they borrowed an old yoke, and two of the longtime members (leaders in the congregation) were hitched up. And they pulled, and they pulled, but nothing happened.

And so (then) they invited the members of the Building Team to join them. And they all pulled, but the plow still didn’t move. And so then the Church Council joined in. And then it was the pastors. And then the Sunday School teachers and the Finance Team. But still the plow did not move.

Finally, they invited the entire congregation to join them, and every member came up and took hold of the rope and pulled, and the plow moved, and the ground was broken, and the lesson from that memorable ceremony was clear (for them and for us). That’s the first story.

The second story is more personal, (and it happened not back in 1957, but in January of 2009). And it happened in this sanctuary. And it involved one of your pastors. And it’s a day he’ll never forget.

We were only a few days into construction. To stay within the budget, we had agreed to do a good part of the demolition. And we had a good turnout (that day). We had boys and girls. We had moms and dads. We had grandparents and grandchildren. And we took this place apart. We tore down the old walls. We pulled out the old communion rails. We cut into pieces the old altar platform and the lectern and the pulpit and we hauled them all outside to be thrown away. And the place was gutted. And we did a lot. And it all felt good.

Later that same night, I came back into this space and I began to cry. (And I cried), because I was sad, because some of the old fixtures (that had served this place and its people) for so many years were gone. (And I cried), because I was overwhelmed, because this project that had been in the planning stages for so many years (had now begun) and there was no turning back. (And I cried), because I was humbled, because I knew then (as clearly as I’ve ever known in my life) that if this plan was to succeed, this vision that we had been given would ever become a reality, that it would only be by the will and the grace of God.

My friends, by the will and the grace of God, you and I have been called and chosen to be His people. By the will and the grace of God, you and I have been brought together in this place (and for this time) to share in a work that will last forever. And by the will and the grace of God, we have been given a vision, and with the dedication of this sanctuary today, that vision is one step closer to becoming real.

“A Place With A Purpose.” Today we celebrate and we give thanks and we dedicate this building (and our lives) to the work and the glory of God. Amen.