

10.12.25 ~ Pentecost 18
“God’s Vision to Grow & Flourish”
The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Isaiah 54:2-3, 5-8 ^{NRSVUE}

- ² Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes.
- ³ For you will spread out to the right and to the left,
and your descendants will possess nations
and will settle desolate towns.
- ⁵ For your Maker is your husband;
the Lord of hosts is his name;
the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer;
the God of the whole earth he is called.
- ⁶ For the Lord has called you
like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like the wife of a man’s youth when she is cast off,
says your God.
- ⁷ For a brief moment I abandoned you,
but with great compassion I will gather you.
- ⁸ In overflowing wrath for a moment
I hid my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer.

Leader: These Are Hopeful Words from God.

People: Thanks be to God!

Act 4:1-4, 8-14 ^{NLT}

- ¹ While Peter and John were speaking to the people, they were confronted by the priests, the captain of the Temple guard, and some of the Sadducees. ² These leaders were very disturbed that Peter and John were teaching the people that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead. ³ They arrested them and, since it was already evening, put them in jail until morning. ⁴ But many of the people who heard their message believed it, so the number of men who believed now totaled about 5,000.
- ⁸ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of our people, ⁹ are we being questioned today because we’ve done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? ¹⁰ Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. ¹¹ For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says,
- ‘The stone that you builders rejected
has now become the cornerstone.’

¹² There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved.”

¹³ The members of the council were amazed when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, for they could see that they were ordinary men with no special training in the Scriptures. They also recognized them as men who had been with Jesus. ¹⁴ But since they could see the man who had been healed standing right there among them, there was nothing the council could say.

Leader: These Are Miraculous Words of Witness.

All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Creator God, we thank you for this church and its believers. We worship and adore you, remembering Christ’s sacrifice at the cross as he fulfilled your mission to build your kingdom on earth. Last week, we remembered our Godly and church covenant and commitment through communion. This week, we ponder your vision of spiritual growth and flourishing as we prepare to pray specifically for church growth and flourishing here at United Baptist. Lord, help us to hear your visionary words through prophecy and the apostles. Help us to be disciplined prayer warriors as we recommit ourselves to you and this church, studying your word, praying regularly, and listening to your guidance. May we hear your divine vision through the human words of this messenger. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Even though my sermon title is “God’s Vision to Grow and Flourish, I asked myself in preparation, “Who am I to presume to know God’s vision for our church or for any believer?” So, yes, our Creator God does have such a vision for you, us, and UBC, and my title is a presumptuous and yet positive one that we can dissect biblically.

We have spent six and a half years together transitioning, stewarding our resources, pruning and re-evaluating programs, experimenting with new things, studying God’s word, singing, worshipping, and praying together. Yes, we have grieved and rejoiced in community, going through personal and world losses, crises, and events that challenged us. These years have been both challenging and fortifying, building up a resilience of spirit and deep community. Each year’s theme brought a new perspective, building on our faith experience

as a church, our community support efforts, our established and new ministries and missions commitments while strengthening discipleship and engagement. Some years we learned new concepts, and others new tools and practices of faith expression.

As we close out 2025 this quarter with a broader definition of *Vital Hospitality*, we will continue our spiritual growth with a serious prayer effort for numerical growth of visitors, local guests, invitations, transformations, recommitments, and hopefully as God wills it, baptisms and conversions. I do not say these words as promises, because no one human being has that much power. But I do state them as hopes and expectations of divine intervention that God's vision of growth and flourishing for us as a church will continue to reveal and produce. I too am recommitting myself to fervent prayer and hope you'll join me every day at noon to pray for our church here physically if you happen to be in the neighborhood, by phone with another member if you'd like, on Zoom occasionally, or simply wherever you are at noon. I am seeking fearless and called prayer warriors to surface again as we call upon Jesus to lengthen our cords and extend our tent, as Isaiah says. These prayers will be in your own words plus prayers I have written or curated from others or simply listening for God's direction. You may decide to pray the Psalms or sit in silence if you have no words.

This morning, I passed out new prayer booklets to help you remember this effort and discipline of noon prayer. We did this once before and it was fruitful. Obviously, you pray at different times of the day, but this is Biblical to come together in prayer at a specific time seeking divine intervention for a specific purpose. We will be praying

with both inward and outward focus: for our church revitalization, new believers, new and existing congregants, for more safety and stewardship, for children and teens, new and existing relationships, Annandale residents, homes and businesses, for executing well a few large facility projects, for the health and belief of church members, former members, extended families, Mission Center partners, for new Mission Center partners, discipleship growth, and more.

I am working through a small three-book series by Thom S. Rainer and several other book sources about church revitalization and will be sharing it with you. I believe all the work we've been doing up to now has better prepared us to keep moving forward. Next year's theme will be "Roots and Branches" to remember God's foundational roots of the church, Jesus' ministry model, the apostle Paul's evangelistic outreach, and Peter and John's transformational testimony – all of which helped build what we know as the Christian church and will be our models of growth and flourishing. More to come about this next year, so today's message sets the tone for us.

Isaiah's prophecy reminds Israel that her descendants will increase so much that she will have to enlarge her tent to fit them all. The chapter before describes the suffering servant (presumed to be Jesus) who will succeed in bringing the Kingdom into being. Israel will be redeemed by God's re-gathering after exile, and of course, we know our redemption is through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. This passage is my favorite symbolic language for the church (tents and cords are so visual) and uses a marriage metaphor as the apostles used for the church. The shame mentioned could go all the way back to their Egyptian slavery, so the

writer reminds them to fear not, that God is with them in their struggles. An important message for us, too, as society exiles Christians more and more. Yes, we've had more people, and loved ones have moved on or passed away, but with God and his great compassion he "will gather you again." For Isaiah, God's vision was growth and flourishing as the Israelites returned to Jerusalem. That covenant relationship with God and between us and Jesus is due to the divine unconditional love and grace available to all of us through surrender and faith.

In the Acts 4 passage, the apostles had a holy boldness about sharing their faith with others. They had been through the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and finally the Pentecost, experiencing the power of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit Jesus had promised as Comforter and Councilor. They were called to build Christ's church and continue his mission. "Whatever you ask in my name I will do so that the Father may be glorified in the Son." Thousands were transformed by the name of Jesus. Paul's, Peter's and John's witnesses were influential because of Christ. They were mere mortals, tentmaker and fishermen. Everything they did in ministry was done through the divine power of salvation through Jesus. Nothing was done for their egos or arrogance to lead some movement. Their work was done in humility and often in opposition to authorities. We sometimes feel powerless or not skilled enough to evangelize but because of our salvation, we have the divine power to share our faith stories. Despite recent hurdles for church growth in today's society, God's vision of growth and flourishing still calls this congregation, leaders, and pastor to obey and to pray. From Rainer's book: "Prayer is a prerequisite for revitalization; it is also a byproduct of

it . . . even if only a few faithful members. But God is able and willing us use those few to be his instruments for revitalization . . . they saw it again and again” in their surveys and successful revived churches. Jesus is our capstone and was the reason for this church; let us not forget he fulfilled God’s vision and through him, so can we. Amen? Amen. ||

Let us pray. Dear Lord, we pray for your growth and flourishing here at United. Forgive us for any complacency and help us to boldly recommit to you and one another. Lord, we ask you to bring others who love you or are curious about you so that we may nurture and disciple them. Change us as we must to attract others to our congregation. We dedicate ourselves to this calling and ask you to multiply us as you continue to multiply our resources. Embolden us as we go on our way. We do pray in your name, Amen.