

4.30.23 – Easter 4 & 20th UBC Anniversary

“Building the Body of Christ, the Church”

The United Baptist Church, Annandale, VA

Psalm 84 (NIV)

For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm.

- ¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
Lord Almighty!
- ² My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.
- ³ Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young—
a place near your altar,
Lord Almighty, my King and my God.
- ⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house;
they are ever praising you.
- ⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.
- ⁸ Hear my prayer, Lord God Almighty;
listen to me, God of Jacob.
- ⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favor on your anointed one.
- ¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts
than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- ¹¹ For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless.
- ¹² Lord Almighty,
blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Leader: These are Words of Praise for God. All: Thanks be to God!

1 Peter 2:4-10 (NLT)

Living Stones for God's House

⁴ You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor.

⁵ And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests. Through the mediation of Jesus Christ, you offer spiritual sacrifices that please God. ⁶ As the Scriptures say,

“I am placing a cornerstone in Jerusalem,
chosen for great honor,
and anyone who trusts in him
will never be disgraced.”

⁷ Yes, you who trust him recognize the honor God has given him. But for those who reject him,

“The stone that the builders rejected
has now become the cornerstone.”

⁸ And,

“He is the stone that makes people stumble,
the rock that makes them fall.”

They stumble because they do not obey God's word, and so they meet the fate that was planned for them.

⁹ But you are not like that, for you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

¹⁰ “Once you had no identity as a people;
now you are God's people.
Once you received no mercy;
now you have received God's mercy.”

Leader: These Are Merciful Words of God! All: Thanks be to God!

Please pray with me:

Dear Lord, Hallelujah! We praise you this morning for your resurrection and for this 20th Anniversary of your church. Be present to us now as we study these Scriptures and celebrate the joys and lessons learned over these twenty years. Comfort our memories of those no longer with us who were also instruments of the consolidation, loyal to the Great Commission and your vision of a united, thriving church. May you bless us with hope and courage to continue the legacy begun in the 1940's and re-envisioned in 2003. Thank you for our faith upon which your church is built and help us to open our doors and hearts to those who do not know you. May your voice be the one heard today as you speak through mine. Amen.

Happy Anniversary, Church! Congratulations on twenty years as The United Baptist Church, a divine experiment of resource consolidation, stewardship, discipleship, and evangelism. We have

already shared one legacy hallmark in the reading of Psalm 150, our joy of praising God through worship and music over the years. Psalm 84 also speaks to the joys we share in pilgrimage to church each Sunday for praise and study. The anonymous psalm writer yearns for a formal place of worship and for the living God himself. He lauds the dwelling place of the Lord as we churches have done over many years, yet realizing that our hearts and souls are the true dwelling place of God.

Today we celebrate this 20th Anniversary of blending two sacred dwellings and a third congregation into a brand-new Body of Christ. You and many others prayed and pondered a consolidation in the months leading up to April 27, 2003, the official first worship of The United Baptist Church. You were pilgrims and pioneers longing to see more of God by joining resources, missions, ministries, and people. In our psalm and I believe in *our* history, the pilgrims were strengthened by God's blessings along the difficult way. The Valley of Baca (which means balsam tree) had been a waterless place that miraculously filled with springs from the rains and pools of collected water. For the people, this oasis became a metaphor of God's abundant provision: water in the desert—hope and new life.

When I asked a few of you to share the blessings of coming together, the staff development was praised. There were staffing vacancies in both First Baptist Church of Annandale and Boulevard Baptist Church that were easily filled by staff from each church, and they worked well together! This building had good parking and a convenient elevator. I understand that the working teams with representatives from each church were compatible and managed to synthesize corporate

documents, policies, budgets, mission, vision, property decisions, facilities issues, and more, all the while keeping God's kingdom work and great commission the priority. According to Religion News Service, church attendance (*religiosity* they call it) declined in mid-1980's and 1990's and continued a slow decline over twenty years. Prophetically driven, both congregations devoted themselves to prayer and discernment, as the psalmist does. They affirmed their roles as loyal servants of Christ, loving one another, and agreeing that through God's love, one day in the courts of the temple in God's **presence** was greater than a thousand days anywhere else. God would bless and shield them (as he did United) if they trusted him. We know now, as did the psalmist, that the joining of voices for worship, and even the challenging blend of liturgies and methods led to unlimited blessings through the humility and collaboration of faithful and strong Christian leaders.

Peter, in the second passage, describes what holy living looks like, explaining that the first step toward it is fellowship with Jesus Christ, the living stone. We believers are flawed yet forgiven; if we strive to be more like Jesus, that living stone of faith, we, the body of Christ, can become living stones that God builds into a **spiritual house** that stands the test of time. Jesus told Peter in Matthew 16:18: "On this rock I will build my church." Christ is clearly the rock or cornerstone. A capstone or cornerstone is the visible support on which the foundation rests. For the body of Christ coming together in worship and ministry, in Peter's day and yours twenty years ago, early Christ-followers and you re-affirmed your church attendance was built on Jesus Christ as the bedrock of the decision, not some building or weekly club of nice people. True, the

consolidation was not comfortable for every member, but for those who made this choice, Kingdom work has flourished, and God's will was done. The resulting consolidated church was not based on property or finances alone, but on the potential for Christ-centered service to a community in need, Annandale and Fairfax County. The consolidation and stewardship of resources and thriving ministries of both churches opened opportunities for others going through similar decline, like the members of National Gardens, some of whom joined United. I remind you that you were a pioneer in this area, and we still get calls of inquiry from pastors in discernment over their next steps to steward their faith and property as the culture shifts even more.

Peter closes his remarks with words of encouragement to practice lives of holiness. God is still at the center of any church community; we must let him be the focus. Peter's hearers were obedient and trusted God; he renamed them God's Chosen People! Before Christ, only the Israelites were considered chosen, but now Gentiles and Jews were embraced into the new body of Christ, a royal priesthood belonging to God. You too trusted God's plan twenty years ago; our covenant sets the tone and guidelines of how we united from three congregations, and how we will go forward obediently to be the faith community and Mission Center God intended. This spiritual temple (*not the building*) of the faithful few or many is **eternal** because Christ the cornerstone built it! His sacrifice we just celebrated with Easter and God's unlimited mercy and grace should reassure us and spur us on to continue meeting together, serving the community, studying God's word, and caring for one another in sickness and in health, inviting others to join us on this pilgrimage to share the

Gospel in actions and words, no matter the cultural shifts we see. We are **united** as one foundation with purpose and mission, and in recent years, I assure you from my witness, that Christ is changing us, growing us spiritually, invigorating our purpose, stewarding our resources, and preparing us to share his love, his mercy, our life lessons, wisdom, and maturity with a spiritually starving generation.

Last week's journey to Emmaus was a "Divine Experiment" of sorts; the two disciples were open and willing to receive a stranger no matter the risk, and Christ's divinity opened their eyes and hearts to receive him as the risen Lord. And they told the story! We must continue to tell our church's story and our personal faith stories, so that others can receive eternal life here now and forever. Let us continue the divine experiment of Christianity through The United Baptist Church and Mission Center. Let us be holy and devoted to Christ and each other, yet fulfilled and motivated by what has been and what is yet to come as we re-commit ourselves and our resources to the Kingdom work at hand, needed more today than ever before. Amen! ||

Will you pray with me? Creator God, we are grateful that men and women of faith risked everything to follow your teaching to meet the needs of strangers, to care for one another, to spread the Gospel message, and to steward our building space and resources. Lord, we ask for your supernatural strength, courage, and blessing to continue what you began twenty years ago with this Body of Christ. Help us to continue our mission and vision in obedience and trust and may all our work be done in **your** name, we pray, **Amen.**