

Steeple Rededication

Psalm 122, Isaiah 35

Center Church, Hartford

September 9, 2018

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Well, we have a renewed, repaired, refurbished and resilient steeple! It took over a year of hard work by skilled architects, crafters, scrapers, painters, gilders, mast-makers, electricians, clock-makers, bell-ringer makers, and more. It took several years of work on fund raising to start to pay for it, fund raising that will continue now as seek grants to finish paying for it.

It was a lot of trouble, a lot of work, a lot of money.

And what do we have to show for it?

Has that work and money solved the problems of Hartford? Fed the hungry? Housed the homeless? Eliminated racial injustice? Made sure that members of the LGBTQ community are treated as full human beings? Fixed the education system so our children are given the best preparation for adulthood? Addressed the evils of mass incarceration? Eliminated political corruption?

Nope. And there may be those who think that the time, work and money put into this project might have been better spent at addressing all those issues. They could be right. And at one time in my life, I might have been one of those people, and on some days, when the troubles of Hartford pile up at the Church House door, I still am.

But I also have a different vision of what has just happened here, and I relate it to something that happens all the time in the Bible. The proclamation of the “now but not yet.” The lifting up of hope in hopelessness. The reminder that God still is in action and that we need to seek diligently to figure out where and how, and then follow.

The Isaiah reading today is one of those times. All those lovely sentiments about the desert blooming and the lame leaping and God punishing the evil ones, none of that had happened when Isaiah wrote these words. The people were still in exile. Isaiah’s words might have seemed to some as useless as this steeple. He held up a vision, a reminder of how deeply God still loved this people and how, as John Lennon once said, all will be well in the end, and if it’s not well, it’s not the end. Isaiah’s words were part of a foundation laid for a new world.

The same thing happens in Mary's famous song, the Magnificat, where she talks of the poor being lifted up and the proud cast down, all things that had not happened yet, but would be embodied in Jesus and continually worked toward by the Christian community.

The quote at the beginning of the bulletin today notes that we are "guardians of a vision." The vision we hold to tightly is this vision, proclaimed by Isaiah and Hannah and Mary and countless others across millennia, of love, justice, peace and hope. Our own ancestors here in Hartford held this vision, and just like us, tried to both proclaim and live it out. Sometimes they succeeded, like us, and sometimes, like us, they failed, epically. The vision still lived.

Back in June, 60 of us gathered in retreat, and we remembered the stories of the early churches as they are told in the book of Acts. We remembered their vision, and Jesus' call to his disciples to keep fishing, even though there seemed to be no fish. We wrote down some pieces of the vision we caught on paper fish. If you have a fish, please read what's on it now, really loud!

"We are guardians of a vision, not curators of the department of ancient monuments." This building, inside and out, including the steeple, sits here in the midst of the tall buildings of Hartford, in the shadow of Travelers Tower and the Gold Building and Bushnell Towers. All of them bigger than we are in almost every way.

And yet, that steeple bell rings, making a sound that draws us out of cell phones and bus engines and sirens and reminds us of another vision. "If I had a bell..."

The light shines from that steeple as darkness falls and proclaims that light shines in the darkness and cannot be put out, not by anything or anyone. Hope glows.

The weathervane blows where it will, like the Spirit of God, constantly at work, pushing, nudging, sometimes upending what **is**, in the press toward what can be.

The spire points up, it is not square which holds in and holds down. It points up, not because that's where God is, but to remind us that there is more than we can see, more than we can imagine, more than our successes or failures, joys or troubles. To reminds us that the cosmos proclaims the glory of God, and whatever glory human beings claim pales next to that.

This is the story every one of us needs to be telling when we tell about the steeple. Not just how pretty it is or how lovely to hear the bell or magical to see the lights at night, but what it **means** for us! It is not like the Travelers' spire. It means something different. It expresses part of the vision. God's vision. Our vision. God's mission. Our mission. But it only does so if we interpret it to others. If we don't, it's just a pretty piece of old architecture.

In Psalm 122, the beauty and majesty of Jerusalem is celebrated. If you've been there, you know that it is a majestic city, full of ancient monuments, even then. People on pilgrimage sang this song, and as they approached the city gates and the end of their journey, they were indeed glad to see the holy city. But then, as now, the place we call the Holy Land faced violence and misery, both from outside its walls, and from within.

Not unlike Hartford or the United States of America today. Like them, we look at the beauty around us **and** pray for peace on our city, our country, the world. Our vision also compels us to let that prayer **work** in us, in our bodies, minds, souls, so that we have a holy discomfort with things the way they are. That vision calls us to open ourselves to the wind that blows the weathervane, that Spirit of God, the creative, imaginative, never-giving-up Spirit that calls us to be the same way in service of love and justice, hope and courage, and yes, peace. We are glad to come to this place because we find here the hope, strength, courage and wisdom and companions we need to follow the vision. The steeple reminds us of that every time we see it.

So, friends, go out of your way sometime this week, to look at the steeple. Come here when worship is not happening and look and remember. Remember the "now but not yet" continuing activity of God. Then tell others about our amazing steeple, and **tell them why it is here, and why we are here**. Then, let's all get to work to live that vision. Amen.