

***FAIR FRIENDS, HERE IS A GREAT MARVEL,
FOR I SEEM TO SEE A TREE OF IRON***
**A SERMON PREACHED AT FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH GREENWICH
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CONSECRATION
OF THE NEW CHRISTIAN EDUCATION BUILDING
JANUARY 13, 2008
THE LESSONS FOR THE DAY—I KINGS 6:37-7:1; II CHRONICLES 6**

“**I**n the fourth year of the reign of King Solomon,” the Bible tells us, “in the month of Ziv, Solomon laid the foundation of the house of the Lord. In the eleventh year of Solomon’s reign, in the month of Bul, the house was finished in all its parts. Solomon was seven years in building it.”

If you’re paying attention, you can find a little humor and a little poetry in the length of time it took Solomon to build what was probably the most magnificent worship sanctuary in the world of that time. Here’s the humor; the Biblical historian is a funny guy. He tells us that it took Solomon *seven* years to build a house for *God*. But then in the very next verse, in a laconic aside apropos of nothing at all, he tells us that it took Solomon *thirteen* years to build a house for *himself*. As grand as the Jerusalem Temple was, Solomon’s palace, apparently, was 46% grander. In a town of decadent mansions and modest public spaces, we understand Solomon, don’t we?

That’s the humor. The poetry is that, just like Solomon, it took us seven years to dream, plan, design, draw, and raise this hulk out of the ground. It might be an arbitrary choice, but you could say the starter’s gun went off on July 2, 2000, when I preached on this passage from this pulpit; for all practical purposes, that was the beginning. July in the year 2000 was our month of Ziv. And now, we’ve finally done it. This is our month of Bul. Ninety-one months, 392 weeks, 2,737 days.

The Bible relates the story of the construction of the Jerusalem Temple in minute and monotonous detail; we learn more about it than we really want to know. The Jews were very proud of their Temple, and I am very proud of our church, so I’m going to take a point of personal privilege and tell you, like the historian in the biblical books of First Kings and II Chronicles, about some of my favorite things in the new building.

This is a very personal list. I don’t have to tell you how great the new Fellowship Hall is because you already know the careful thought people like Lisa Bienstock and Sandy Herman lavished upon that space which now extends our coffee hour to 2:00 most Sunday afternoons and gives us a gracious place in which to welcome our neighbors on Thanksgiving Day, for instance. I don’t have to tell you what an exquisite sacred space that new chapel is because you already know that Mark Thompson and Barbara Freeman somehow managed to carve a holy place out of tight and almost unmanageable dimensions. You’ve seen the chancel furniture in there and you already know it just doesn’t get any more beautiful than that.

But enough about the important things. What about the trivial things, my favorite things in this new building? Have you seen the bookshelves in my office? Most of my colleagues would trade their second-favorite child for those bookshelves. I need a ladder to get to

the top shelf. When I show off that office, I feel like the biblical historian who brags to us that “Solomon lined the inside of the Temple with boards of cedar; from the floor of the house to the rafters of the ceiling he covered them with wood. This was the most holy place.” It’s oak not cedar in our case, but it feels like a holy place to me.

Now, the only way I can work in there without being embarrassed by the extravagant size of it is that I have to think of it as yours, not mine. If the door is open, make yourself at home; well, not if I’m preventing a divorce in there or repairing a broken heart or something. But have a meeting in there. Borrow a book; write down the title, leave your name, and take it. I’ll tell you when it’s overdue. Just remember that this is the list of the things I love: Kathy, Michael-and-Taylor, Duncan, and my books.

My favorite things. Did you know they built a custom cabinet for the filing system I’ve been using since 1983? Everything I read that I think might make a better Christian out of you, I put on one of these 5x8 cards. Everything good that I hear, everything good that I see, everything funny or wise or sad that you say, *The New York Times*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, television commercials, jokes, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *War and Peace*, *Reader’s Digest*, *King Lear*, *New Yorker* cartoons, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Robin Williams, *Schindler’s List*, Calvin’s *Institutes*, *Juno*, Reinhold Niebuhr, Jerry Seinfeld, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Brothers K*, *Little Miss Sunshine*—it all goes on these 5x8 cards, filed alphabetically by topic and scripture reference, so I can get at it when I need it. I might have read it nine years ago, but I can get at it when I need it.

I started this in 1983. It became obsolete in, oh, maybe 1989. What a dumb system—high maintenance, poor Carolyn has to type all this stuff, very flammable, no back-up, takes up all kinds of space. My younger colleagues file all this kind of stuff digitally—backed-up, fire-proof, the whole thing in a lap-top they carry with them wherever they go. But I started in 1983 when there was no such thing as digital archiving for the masses, and once you get started on something like this, you’re stuck, there’s no way out; you’re committed. My whole brain is on these cards. Mark Thompson designed me a custom cabinet to hold all 14,000 of these cards. I guarantee you my successor will not use that thing, but I love you because you invested in the way I do ministry.

My favorite things: this is one. You know what this is? This is the fabric on the couch in my office. Why this extra fabric? This belongs to Duncan. Duncan, you see, likes to climb up on the couch to keep company with whomever is sitting there, and when he does, there will no muddy pawprints on that couch because of Duncan’s Throw—this can be cleaned. It blends; you don’t even know it’s there. Don’t scoff. This is important. Duncan has befriended and becalmed many sweaty confirmands clutching damp statements of faith and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Teenagers think I’m scary, even my own teenager. But they take one look at Duncan and think, “Well, he can’t be *that* bad.” Young couples, engaged to be married, apprehensive and anxious, come to my office to endure my brutal pre-marital interrogation; Duncan saves the day with a laughing face and a wag of his big golden butt. Someday I’m going to preach a sermon called *God and Golden Retrievers*. It’ll be about unconditional

acceptance. I got that idea from Matt Lauer; it's on a 5x8 card in my new custom cabinet.

I was so touched when I saw this. This is a gift from Lisa Bienstock and Sandy Herman. I didn't know if they would even let Duncan in the front door of this pristine new building because 'clean' is not Duncan's best thing, but they threw out the welcome mat, almost literally. For me, this thing is emblematic of our ministry here: everybody's welcome here; if you want to come here and pray, you can come here and pray, even if you have four legs and a tail.

Well, all of that is pretty small and maybe even self-indulgent, but now you have to listen to my fourth favorite thing, because here's where the sermon really starts. My fourth favorite thing about this new building isn't even in the building; it's outside. One evening a couple of months ago, returning home late after a night out, I stopped by the church for a minute to retrieve something I'd left in my office; my wife was with me. This is, as you know, a bustling neighborhood, one of the busiest intersections in town, but it's unexpectedly still and placid after 11:00. They'd just installed the iron lampposts on the edge of the property, the first time Kathy had seen them. "Oh my," she sighed, like a child upon first sight of the Christmas tree. "They're charming. It's the lamppost in Narnia." Whose idea were those iron lampposts? Now, I know, you have one in your front yard, but it's not 18 feet tall, built to illumine a forest, and there aren't seven of them.

Do you remember when Lucy makes her way through the magic wardrobe and she notices that the fur coats brushing her face gradually turn into sharp pine needles and the wooden boards beneath her feet begin to crunch like

snow and she begins to understand that she is in another world? What's the first thing she sees when she steps into Narnia? That lamppost in Narnia—it's the borderline between two kingdoms, the meeting-place of two worlds. On this side is home, and on the other—what? Adventure. Struggle. Endeavor. The White Witch. Aslan.

I hope you know the story: four ordinary children travel from the everyday world of rural wartime England through a magical wardrobe and emerge in the hidden land of Narnia, in winter, at night, under the light of an iron lamppost improbably situated in the middle of deep forest. Having emigrated to this brave new world, the children live what seems an entire lifetime there, face great dangers, surrender to and resist grave temptations, accomplish brave feats, vanquish dire malice, and grow up to become kings and queens of Narnia. Over time they forget England and their old lives; they even forget the wardrobe and the lamppost.

"And they made good laws," writes C. S. Lewis, "and kept the peace and saved good trees from being unnecessarily cut down, and liberated young dwarves and young satyrs from being sent to school, and generally stopped busybodies and interferers and encouraged ordinary people who wanted to live and let live." They become known as King Peter the Magnificent, Queen Susan the Gentle, King Edmund the Just, and Queen Lucy the Valiant. They begin to speak a stilted, aristocratic vocabulary, like the kings and queens of old England.

And then after what seems a lifetime of grand adventures, the children, now kings and queens, stumble upon the strangest sight. "Fair friends," says Queen Susan, "here is a

great marvel, for I seem to see a tree of iron.” “Madam,” says Edmund, “if you look well upon it, you shall see that it is a pillar of iron with a lantern set on the top thereof.” Edmund goes on. “It runs in my mind that I have seen the like before; as it were in a dream, or the dream of a dream.”¹ And thus via this tree of iron they make their way back home, and that is just the beginning of many other great adventures.

The lamppost is at the borderline between two kingdoms, the meeting-place of two worlds. On this side—Home, hearth, family, friends, song, prayer, an encouraging word. On the other—Adventure, Danger, the White Witch, Aslan. You’ll come here to pray, and to sing, and to share glad tidings and sad, laughter and tears, joy and sorrow, and every time you leave this place, this home, having met the Creator of all the stars and worlds in this holy place, you will pass under the gleam of that lamppost into the strange land of Narnia, and it will remind you to make good laws, and to keep the peace, and to save good trees from being unnecessarily cut down, and to liberate young dwarves and young satyrs.

And when you’ve been out there in the beautiful but dangerous land of Narnia for too long, battling werewolves and facing giants, you’ll know when you see that tree of iron that you can always come home—to be renewed, to gather the scattered pieces of your lives and puzzle them back together, and to rest your tired bones, and to patch your broken heart, and to gladden your spirit with true Christian friendship. The door to the wardrobe always stands open to welcome you home. If you want to come here and pray, you can come

here and pray, even if you have four legs and a tail.

Those lampposts lie at the borderline between two kingdoms. On this side of the lamppost—a beautiful new home. But you can’t stay home forever. You must go. Winter always threatens Narnia, and there are White Witches to oppose. And Aslan is out there. On the other side of the lamppost—exciting adventures, gleaming swords to brandish, mighty steeds to mount. But you can’t stay out there forever either. It’s exhausting. Sometimes you just gotta come home.

Fair friends, here is a great marvel, for I seem to see a tree of iron. Thanks be to God for beauty within and challenge beyond, for lucent benedictions past any capacity to hope or to dream, for love stronger than death, and for a light that shines in the darkness.

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), 149-152.