

## Annual Meeting Sermon – February 2024

My long-ago seminary classmate and longtime Habitat for Humanity colleague, Tom Hall, told this story.

When the world seemed to be going to “heck in a handbasket” people were walking around saying “The sky is falling, the sky is falling.” Everybody fretting and blaming and discouraged. But down on the Town Green there was a little bird, lying on its back, one of the “tweety bird” type birds, lying there with its little spindly legs and arms straight up in the air, to hold up the sky!

“You think you’re doing any good, trying to hold up the sky with those silly, skinny legs and arms?”

Taking a deep breath, the tiny bird said, “one does what one can.”

One does what one can.

That’s the spirit of this 299-year-old church. When we did our Church House/Barn renovation 15 years ago, or so, I said that our goal was not to be a megachurch, or the biggest church in town, or the fanciest.

Our goal was to be the best church God needed us to be. When I wrote my book called “Church: One Pilgrim’s Progress”, I told you it was my description of what a local church can be when we’re at our best.

Alida and I have a lot of joys being your pastors and the best one is knowing that every day you all wake up determined to be your best. Your work life. Your faith life. Your community life. Your family life. Your church life – heck, your pickleball, your golf, your reading club. You name it, and we see you giving your best.

Now some of you are going to say “pshaw”, I’m laying it on too thick. Ok, we’re not perfect; and most of you are type A personalities, which means you’re never satisfied – which is part of being your best. You don’t settle.

We don’t settle.

Like the spindly, hopelessly idealistic, skinny little bird faced with the existential crisis of “the sky is falling”, “one does what one can”.

I loved the British actress, Haley Mills. I loved her as a teenager, as an adult I loved her film “Pollyanna” which is why you’ll never hear me say, “I don’t want to sound like Pollyanna, but...”. I DO want to sound like Pollyanna. I DO want to believe that the best outcome is possible.

Which is why we chose today's scripture, an unusual one, one that most people don't know. Here's the quick background, a 90 second history of ancient Judaism. Once upon a time there was no Israel, no Judaism, no Jews. Until God starts something new with Abraham, 4,000 years ago, in ancient Iraq. God says to Abraham, "You stick with me, I'll stick with you, and we'll create a religion, a way of life, a spirit that will bless the world."

500 years later, 500 years (!), Abraham's descendants, by then known as the Israelites (named after one of their founders, Israel), they landed in the Promised Land. They had the unique idea of monotheism, one God. Plus, they had The Ten Commandments in a box – literally.

You remember the movie "Raiders of the Lost Ark"? Or you've heard of the "Ark of the Covenant"? The Ark was literally the box that held the central, holy, sacred items of Judaism: The 10 Commandments' stone tablets, Moses' brother's miraculous walking stick, and a golden bowl that held the "manna" from heaven. All three represented God's closeness with Israel. In a box. Wherever the Jewish people went, they carried that box on long poles.

Finally, when they conquered "The Promised Land" the Jewish people had a homeland, some permanence, some stability. For a while they put this holy box, the Ark, in an elaborate tent.

But, a tent represents a nomadic life, a likely chance to "pull up stakes" and move on.

So finally, the Jewish people gave God, and the Ark, a proper place, what became known as "Solomon's Temple". It was spectacular. They hired the best craftsmen and artisans, they imported the finest wood and purest gold, they used 30,000 workers, plus 70,000 carriers, 80,000 stone cutters, and 3,300 foremen. At last Israel had a Temple, a permanent Temple, worthy of God. God's house, a home for the Ark.

Today's lengthy scripture lesson tells us about the day Solomon's Temple was dedicated. We can all imagine the pride, the joy, the emotion of the day, across the entire nation. Certain things jumped out at me when I read this scripture. First, the joy of the people could not be contained. The Bible tells us "That all of Israel celebrated the Dedication for seven days, and seven days more until the king sent everybody home!" (1 Kings 8:66). Earlier we're told that the worship experience was so intense the clergy couldn't do their work! God's presence and the people's faith were all that was needed!!

Second, the generosity of the people could not be contained. At one point the offerings were so immense they couldn't be counted (1 Kings 8:5). And later we read, "So the King and all the Israelites dedicated the Temple of the Lord... but the bronze altar was too small to hold the (various) offerings" (1 Kings 8:63-64).

Everything about this story is over the top, which is why I picked it. The Temple itself is spectacular. The people's response of faith is out of control. The offering is beyond belief. And that's us, that's our little top of the hill historic New England-y church: spectacular, out of control, and beyond belief.

Our church is "spectacular". No not in the ancient Israel sense of Solomon's Temple, ornate and lavish, but in our own ancient American sense, we are quietly spectacular. There is absolutely the breath of God in this place, and that's beautiful.

Likewise, our people's response to faith is "out of control." Since this is the Sunday you vote my salary for next year, I hate to admit this, but lots of times I wonder why you need me! The depth of your faith... the breadth of your reach... all "out of control" in the sense that I don't need to control it.

100 days a year I read a daily devotion written by our church members, always intimate, always powerful, always faithful. I'm going to embarrass our friend, Barbara Strickland, right now; she has written our Easter devotion, and it is soooo much better than what I'll say on Easter, soooo much better, and I have seven weeks left to work on my message. And I still won't match it.

Then there's 12 Sundays a year when you folks, you church people, do the whole summer outdoor service and I don't know how to be more blunt: they all blow me away. Every Sunday I sit there stunned, inspired. 12 Sundays of the year I wish everybody was hearing those people, you people, rather than hearing me.

And finally, just like those ancient Israelites your offerings are beyond belief. We have an almost \$1.2 million pledge goal to meet our budget, and we are within \$40,000. In this same year we raised \$2.3 million for our 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Capital Campaign. Our Mission Board gave away \$200,000 to projects on the front lines of poverty to human need. Our Appalachia work is almost a quarter million dollars outside the budget. And time after time we respond to Girl Scout bake sales, Ukraine relief, Christmas and Easter gifts, and Thanksgiving dinners for families in need.

Like Solomon's Temple, we can hardly "count your generosity" and our "alter is too small" to hold your gifts. That's life in our 299<sup>th</sup> year. Like that little bird: Each one doing what "one can". Doing our best.