

“Sacred Space”

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

One hundred and forty years ago this month, August 12, 1869, a Thursday, at 4:00 in the afternoon there was a ceremony held in the Casey Opera House, nearby on Genesee St., possibly next to the Boyle Center where the loop road is now. The ceremony was for the laying of the cornerstone for the sanctuary in which we are gathered this morning. Most of the ceremony took place at the Opera House. When it came time for the actual laying of the cornerstone, everyone walked up the block to this site. The newspaper article describing the ceremony reports that the house was “well-filled.” From another article of that period we know that the opera house seated 2,500 people, so we can assume that there was a fairly large crowd present for the occasion.

According to the Rev. Dr. Samuel Miles Hopkins who spoke at the ceremony, that same year no less than seven church buildings were erected in Auburn, “a city of twelve or fourteen thousand souls.” Four of them were “churches of large dimension,” while the other three were “designed to be commodious and handsome chapels.” Seven church buildings erected in one year in the late 1860’s here in Auburn! It must have been an exciting time to be a resident of this city. Auburn was growing and the religious community was exploding.

If some of this sounds vaguely familiar it may be because last year about this time I made reference to these “ceremonial exercises of laying the corner stone.” But I couldn’t resist bringing it up again for two reasons. First, the event occurred, as I said, 140 years ago this month. And second, it fits in so well with our Old Testament reading for today from 1 Kings in which King Solomon offers a prayer at the dedication of the temple he has just had constructed. And I’m pretty sure that this will not be the last time that reference will be made to this ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone. We are still a little over two years away from the 150th anniversary of the founding of Central Church. Many of us are finding the history of this church to be so rich and so inspiring that it is hard not to talk about it.

Just this week I found an article in an old newspaper (the Syracuse Daily Courier and Union), giving further details about the pastor, the Rev. Henry Fowler -- at least details of which I was not aware. Henry Fowler was the pastor of Second Presbyterian Church here in Auburn, but in the build up to the Civil War, he was apparently quite a vocal advocate of abolition and was, as a result, asked to leave Second. Then Central Church was formed and he became “acting pastor.”

It is interesting reading some of these old newspapers. In the same paper that reported Fowler’s dismissal from Second I found this little statement that I think it would come in the category of a short editorial. “The CAUSE OF The WAR. A rigidly pious old lady down East says ‘this civil war is a judgment upon the nation for permitting women to wear hoops.’ Quite as sensible as some of the pulpit theories on the same subject.” And in the same newspaper: “Tho Abolitionists, cooperating with other fanatical madcaps, got us a Civil war -- which, as Architects of Ruin, ought to satisfy their seemingly Insatiable ambition, but no,—no,—as their ambition now seems to be to add to civil war, a servile insurrection.”

Clearly these were volatile times and sentiments were running high. Abolitionists were not universally regarded with high esteem. In the midst of all of this, we have this article: “CHURCH TROUBLE AT AUBURN.—It appears, from a statement in the Auburn *Advertiser* that the Rev. Henry Fowler was dismissed from the Second Presbyterian Church by the Presbytery in session on Monday week last. The ground of complaint seems to have been an anti-slavery discourse delivered on the fast day. From the Statement in the *Advertiser* it appears that those who asked for his dismissal numbered thirty-six, headed by Hon. John Porter, while nearly three hundred members remonstrated.”

So Henry Fowler is dismissed and he and others from Second and possibly some from other churches, formed Central in 1862 and by 1869 they are ready to build a large church edifice. And I can't help thinking about those people who were part of that congregation, getting ready to build. They have apparently hired an architect and they have plans made up and now they are ready to lay the cornerstone. And like Solomon and the people of the nation of Israel as they prepared to dedicate their new temple, there was a certain amount of excitement.

Both buildings, Solomon's temple and this church structure, were the repository of dreams and hopes of people who saw these buildings as immensely significant to their spiritual lives. The buildings were havens of refuge, places where they could come and offer prayers and hear messages from God, offer sacrifices in the case of the temple, and bring offerings in the case of the church.

It must have been an exciting time for Solomon and the Israelites to see this beautiful new temple completed. Set on a hill in Jerusalem, it is reported that travelers could see the temple glowing in the sunlight from several miles away as they approached the city. It must have been magnificent! Stone masonry crafted by the most skilled Phoenician artisans, massive bronze castings, beautiful woodwork carved from imported Lebanese cedars and cypress trees that had been floated down the Mediterranean coast, and great stone blocks quarried from the hill country of Ephraim. The golden altar, the golden table for the bread of the Presence, the lamp stands, flowers, lamps, and tongs, all made of gold; the cups, snuffers, basins, dishes for incense, and fire pans, all of pure gold; the sockets for the doors of the innermost part of the house, the most holy place, and for the doors of the nave of the temple, also made of gold. (see 1 Kings 7:48-50)

Likewise, it must have been an exciting time here in Auburn in 1869 with churches being built and congregations being formed. And the building of this sanctuary for one of the newest congregations in Auburn, Central Presbyterian Church, must have created some amount of buzz. Seated on the stage at the Casey Opera House that afternoon were "the various clergy of the city and surrounding towns. Members of the Board of Education and the Common Council attended in a body. The bouquets of choice flowers...were arranged with marked taste, and formed a beautiful feature of the occasion." The exercises were opened with everyone standing to sing "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name." There was a reading of scripture and mention of letters of regret from those unable to attend. A prayer was offered by the Rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church followed by the Lord's Prayer. The choir and the band rendered an anthem, "Great is the Lord." Then the Rev. Dr. Samuel Miles Hopkins gave the address, which was received, according to the article, "with the highest satisfaction." Then the pastor, the Rev. Henry Fowler, "gave the dimensions of the proposed edifice. Entire length, 150 ft., extreme breadth 75 ft." The "audience room," which I presume is where we are seated, 104x62 ft., outside measurement. The Rev. William Searls of the First Methodist Episcopal Church took an offering to help with the cost of the construction that yielded \$350, while the choir, band and Sabbath School scholars rendered "The House Upon the Rock."

Then the audience, preceded by the band, proceeded to the grounds to witness the laying of the cornerstone which contained (and presumably still contains) such treasures as: a copy of the Holy Scriptures; the Shorter Catechism; the Program of the day's exercises; Charter of the City of Auburn; an outline map of Auburn; Silver coins of the United States; a list of subscribers, the amount subscribed and the residence of each subscriber; and other items.

Then the Rev. Henry Fowler laid the cornerstone offering appropriate words, there was a prayer by the Rev. J. B. Condit, the Doxology was sung, the benediction was given and everyone sang together what is called in the article the "national anthem," *America*. The audience dispersed, "all deeply impressed with the solemnity and vital importance of the occasion."

Now here we are in August of 2009, 140 years later, gathered in that completed sanctuary that could only be envisioned by those gathered that August afternoon in 1869. The building that was the repository of hopes and dreams is still that to some extent, but it is also the repository of memories. We are the spiritual descendents of those good people and the inheritors of this place of worship.

Times have changed, of course, in the intervening years. Those gathered that afternoon could not have begun to imagine the changes that have taken place in Auburn and in our world. They lived in a day when church attendance was at a high. If they were able to fill this sanctuary, we feel quite pleased to fill it to a fifth of its capacity. Likewise, they were part of a growing community with churches springing up all around them. Now, in our day, churches are not being built but are being closed. The congregation of the Calvary Presbyterian Church ceased to exist as of two years ago, and the fate of the building, the oldest existing church building in Auburn, is still to be determined. Other church buildings in Auburn have been torn down or have been sold and are being used for other purposes. One of them on the outskirts of town has a bar in what used to be the sanctuary.

The building those good people anticipated at that ceremonial gathering at the Casey Opera House is holding up pretty well almost a century and a half later. It does need some tender loving care, as one might imagine after that amount of time, and, as all are aware, we are in the process of providing that. But the people who were gathered that day would be pleased to know that there is a congregation still worshiping here 140 years later. They would be pleased to know that the prayer offered by the Rev. J. B. Condit is still being answered:

“We thank thee that the cornerstone of this building has now been laid, the symbol of the one only foundation of our hope, which is Jesus Christ, and of the permanence of the faith once delivered to the saints. We pray that the work may be prosecuted with a zeal, an energy and liberality appropriate to the great interests involved in it. May faith in God inspire every heart, and love to the cause of Christ prompt to all the effort and sacrifice demanded. In due time, may Pastor and people be permitted to see the accomplishment of their hopes in a house of worship in which the truth as it is in Jesus shall be long proclaimed – which shall be the spiritual birth-place of multitudes, and the instrument of blessing to this city, in all that constitutes temporal and spiritual prosperity.”

That prayer is still bearing fruit. The good news of Jesus Christ is still being proclaimed week by week in this building. And this building is still, in my opinion, “a blessing to this city.” One can’t help but to be inspired by the zeal and the commitment of those good people, about 140 families, who took on this great project. As in the similar ceremony described in First Kings when Solomon dedicated the temple, the building for which the cornerstone was laid was to be set aside, dedicated for the worship of God.

Yes, it is just a building. We don’t have to have it to worship God. As even Solomon humbly said, after building his beautiful temple, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” We don’t have to have this building to worship God. But we do have it, built for the glory of God and entrusted to us from those who went before us. And so we join our voices in the rest of Rev. Condit’s prayer that day and say with him: “May the building be long preserved, and succeeding generations be gathered within its walls, to receive through divine grace, preparation for heaven. Thus may it be a monument of the truth, written of old – ‘When the Lord shall build up Zion, he will appear in his glory.’”