

SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

December 3, 2006 – One Hundredth Anniversary

Text: Luke 3:6ff; Romans 13:11-14

Pr. Robert M. Goldstein

“Bringing Hope”

I want to start off by first of all thanking all who have worked so hard to bring this day into fruition. I speak first of the many hands that have been and will be involved in today's celebration. But I also speak a word of thanks to the multitude of faithful people and pastors who have gave of their lives to bring Ansgar Danish Lutheran Church into existence, who brought Ansgar and First Finnish together to become St. Francis, and who have carried the weight of bringing St. Francis to where it is today.

Thank God for you all, every one of you! Thank You!

There are times to celebrate and this is one of them. For we celebrate this day the 100th anniversary of the dedication of this building in December 1906. There are pieties in Christianity that decry such observance of brick and mortar as idolatry. And while we ought to heed that scruple, we should not take it to the extreme. For buildings are a part of creation, indeed a wonderful partnership of God, the creator of everything, and humans using our brains and muscles to create, from bricks and mortar, a church.

A church building is also an evangelist. It becomes part of a community, part of their emotional reality as a community. It is silent but it speaks loudly to the community by just being there –perhaps being in their way at first, but then gradually on the way of every person's pilgrimage through this mysterious life.

Now how the community perceives a church building is largely derived from the actions of the church's members. I have two stories to relate about this. As I move around the San Francisco community I am quite surprised that many people know of St. Francis. But, even if they don't, even if they look at me in that polite studied secular suspicion of San Franciscans, as if I were Jerry Falwell or Rasputin, when I tell them that it's the church across from Safeway, then there face changes to an affectionate smile, “Oh you mean, “Our Lady of Safeway.”

Some of us are not happy with that designation, but I am, because in a city as secular and narcissistic as this, to have such good feeling attached to St. Francis is a rare gift indeed. It is a compliment from the wider community to this community of faith who meets within its walls.

The other story involves a chance meeting outside the former First Finnish church on

Belcher St behind me. As I came out of a meeting there I saw a woman in the dark moving her car. I waved to her, thinking she was a member from the same meeting, but instead she was a stranger parking her car –not leaving with it.

As she got out of her car she was a bit wary of a strange man waving to her. Realizing my mistake, I apologized and identified myself as the pastor of St Francis. She turned towards me in a much more relaxed demeanor and went on to say, pointing to St. Francis, “That church really has it all together in the way it cares for this community.” She thanked me for that then said she had to get home on Sanchez but was pleased to have met me. And off she went.

I report these stories as a way of pointing to the Gospel reading this morning. For this building has been identified not in terms of its genuine architectural beauty, nor as an object of hostility, but as a source of good news, of hope for the future. And that is the heart of the readings for this morning: bringing Good News of hope to the world.

This is just a little church. But within its walls abides a great hope for the world. In fact, its walls were barely completed when the Great Earthquake and Fire struck in April of 1906! The church survived the monstrous movement of the earth intact, even escaping the fires that stopped at Market and Guerrero.

Pastor Hansen and Carrie, his daughter, recently trained in nursing, rallied our little church and it became a medical station for the duration of the great sufferings that were to follow. A place of hope. The future was set.

John the Baptist cries out to us to prepare the way of God, leveling the obstructions, smoothing the rough ways, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God. And within a few months of its building, this church was doing just that, baptized into caring for the sufferings of its community. Many people saw the salvation of God within its walls, many found reason to hope again as they looked at its sure silhouette against the Western sky, many saw Christ in our foremothers and forefathers and their sacrifices for this building.

What puzzles me is how the timber and the craftsmen were found to complete the building by December 1906 –barely seven and a half months after the earthquake! I would have thought that both timber and workers were in short supply during the emergencies of the city. But Pastor Hansen and the flock did it! Another miracle!

In our time there are tectonic shifts moving the social landscape. The churches are encountering the full impact of the modern world. The tectonic shift of which I am speaking is that modern science has a far more satisfactory explanation of how people develop sexually – just as thoughtful people have received and accepted science’s better explanations of the universe. And it is for the Churches to think that through. Some denominations are in denial; others are resolutely opposed to this –and to their peril, while others still are muddling their

way.

But John the Baptist calls out to all of us. "Prepare way of God. Level the obstructions, smooth the rough edges, so that all flesh shall see the salvation of God." And sure enough, in the prophetic witness of St. Francis Lutheran Church, the way has been cleared and smoothed out. In the ministries of all its pastors in the tumultuous 1970's, 80's and especially the 90s many persons of all sexual identities discovered Good News in the Christianity within St. Francis' walls, many eyes of flesh saw the salvation of God. Hope.

We have thought it through even though our larger Church family, the ELCA, has not quite yet. We have done what the Church catholic has done for millennia –met new situations and faithfully adapted to new truths. But in the process we have been forced to become emigrants from the wider Lutheran church.

We have come full circle to the first immigrants who left their spiritual home of Denmark. We meet up with them with the same mixture of deep loss of our past and great hope for a future yet to be found. And, as were they, we build this church in faith, in hope and in love. For we have been granted by the grace of God a vision of the New Jerusalem where all are free and welcomed. Let us be humble and strong, let us lay aside the works of darkness and put on the strength of light. Let us live honorably putting on the robe that is Jesus Christ. Another century beckons us. Like our ancestors let use this beautiful building, let us bring hope! Let us bring healing to our lives and to our world.

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Jesus Christ. Amen

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