

On the First Sunday in May, 1869, as Old South Church celebrated its bicentennial, Dr. Jacob Manning, Old South's 14th Senior Minister climbed into the pulpit of the Meetinghouse and preached a sermon "on our condition and prospects as a church of Christ." It was a tumultuous time, just four years after the end of the Civil War - in which Dr. Manning had served as Chaplain for the 43d Massachusetts regiment. The decision had been made to vacate their beloved church home on Washington Street, and find a new location that would allow the congregation to grow. But there was division in the congregation - between those who could not imagine abandoning the church of the past, and those who were willing to fight for Old South's future. So on that bicentennial Sunday what did Dr. Manning do? He told stories. About the founders of the church who refused to limit access to the rites of baptism. About Samuel Sewall whose faith compelled him to write so convincingly against slavery as one of this nation's earliest abolitionists. And possibly even about Phillis Wheatley, whose poetry stirred the soul and conscience of the country. He told them stories, to help them remember who they were - rooted in faith, fighting for justice and liberty. In this time of great transition they were called to cling, not to a building, but to the stories that shaped them. And when they gathered together again, six years later, in this building where we stand today, what did they do? They told stories, about Mary Chilton and Thomas Thacher and Sam Adams - whose stories we still tell today.

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They had not been together, they had not worshiped together for nearly seventy years. They had been a people displaced, dispersed, exiled for a full generation in a foreign land. But now, in Nehemiah's time, they were a people returning - if not yet restored. They had trudged the four month journey from the banks of the Euphrates to Jerusalem, rebuilt their homes and cleared the heaps of debris that occupied the site of the old temple. They erected and dedicated the altar of God on the exact spot where it had formerly stood, and in the second month of the second year, amid great public excitement and rejoicing, the foundations of the Second Temple were laid. As the community returned, the temple walls rose, the structure becoming a symbol of rebuilding and renewal. Then finally, in 516 BCE the work is completed and all the people come together.

They gather - they re-collect - not at the temple but at the Water Gate, where all are admitted. And they call on the Priest Ezra to read to them from the book of the law of Moses. And he read to them. He read to them about the bravery of Abraham who left his homeland to follow the calling of God, about Miriam who saved her brother Moses, and about the Israelites who had also wandered in the wilderness in search of a promised home. He read of God's faithfulness to God's people. And as the people listened they cried. Hearing those stories, of bravery, of sacrifice for a hopeful future, of love and loss - allowed them to acknowledge and name their own bravery, and grief, and hope. Hearing of God's faithfulness allowed them to believe that God would see them through their present struggles as well. So much had changed, so much had been lost along the way. But in retelling the stories, in recollecting, they were re-forming their identity as a community. It is the stories we tell that help us understand who we are and whose we are.

At the All Church Retreat this past October we took up the story of the rebuilding of the temple and the reading of the book in the presence of the whole community. And we asked this question: "imagine the reading of the book that contains the truths that move us the most deeply, that have spoken to us the most importantly (or that we need to hear afresh right now). What would those truths be? What needs to be in that book?" We considered who we have been as a faith community, what has changed - especially in the last two years - and who God is calling us to become. And then, we put together our own book. I happen to have it right here, and you're welcome to take a look after the service, but let me read to you just a few things from this Book.

Some of the words of wisdom we find include: "God is still speaking" "We think if he would eat with them, he would eat with us." "The church is both within and beyond the walls - I set before you an open door"

Another page reads "Nothing can separate us from the love of God: not fear, not isolation, not politics, not Covid, not division, not insurrection, not hate"

"O God Our Help in Ages Past, Our hope for years to come" This favorite hymn was our grounding in the earliest days of the pandemic. Do you remember? We sang these lines, each in our own living rooms, but joining our hearts together in worship through online services.

In the season of Lent 2021 more than 100 people folded more than 2500 paper cranes put on display the day before Easter. A sign of hope. A sign of peace.

“Remember the resilience that you have manifested in the face of adversity and let it be your strength going forward.”

Warning! To enter into the life of this people of God is to encounter God’s soul-challenging, life changing, radicalizing Love. Will you join us? Do you dare?”

This is just a smattering of the wisdom we are leaning on as we navigate this holy season of transition. And there are other stories as well. I think of so many of you who volunteered to help church members who weren’t able to get groceries or medicine in the early days. And we’ll tell stories of the educators, who had to adapt and change so much, and continue to provide support and encouragement to a generation of kids trying to cope. We’ll write about Mary and Hilary and David who cared for Covid patients round the clock and Ruben who administered thousands of vaccines. We’ll tell the story of how one church in Boston took our worship online and out into the world and found new members of this community as far flung as Texas and Michigan and Lebanon.

And then there are the stories written on your hearts. Stories of struggle, of those days you thought you wouldn’t get through - but here you are, by the grace of God. And the book is in no way finished. As we welcome new people into this community they will help us to write the next chapters.

God has written these stories, these songs, these prayers - in our book and in our hearts that we might share them and through that sharing re-collect, together, as a community standing on a sure foundation of love, and bravery and hope. May it be so... Amen.