

## “HOUSEPLANS”

Genesis 15:1-12      Psalms 127:1    Philippians 3:17-4:1    Luke 13:31-35

I admire architects and engineers. To be able to lay out an entire house on paper, complete with building detail for carpenters, plumbers, and electricians stands in my mind as one of the world’s great mysteries. And to those who are able not only to design a house and draw up the plans, but also to build, that house—for these rare mortals I reserve the highest of “super-human” status.

My regard for these folks may stem from my own experiences with designing and building houses. I’ve attempted to build five “houses” of one sort or the other. To date, nearly 30 years after their completion, two of these remarkable structures have been torn down for scrap metal and firewood, one has fallen apart and decayed with no help from anybody, and one (through the efforts of an ingenious and diligent farmer) has been upgraded to a sort of “slum” barn and tool shed, primarily inhabited by chipmunks. A fifth more recent effort – and my pride and joy – is a Victorian playhouse I put together for our granddaughter, Lani. Somehow, it still stands.

If I’ve learned anything from these effort at construction I have learned that the mistakes one can make in building a house are many.

Della Thompson Lute tells of attending a birthday party where the woman of honor entertained her guests by showing them the plans of the house she hoped to build. Very eagerly, she rolled out the plans and elaborated on what would go here and what would go there, and what colors would be used. The enthusiasm of the guests was merely out of politeness, however. The woman, now confined to a nursing home, was celebrating her 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday, and had been planning to build that house for over 60 years. It is possible to wait too long to build.

It’s also possible to build a house too hastily, without having thought through just what you want, or maybe without having the financial resources to finish the job.

There’s another mistake it is possible to make. We find it in Psalms 127:1. *“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”*

What the psalmist means here is more than the construction of a dwelling. In Hebrew, “to build a house” means to raise a family, or to build a nation. On an individual level, it could refer to that which a person makes of his or her life. The truth is, whether or not we are designing our dream home; whether or not we have children, we all are “building a house.”

But what kind of house are we building? Is it a castle, with a moat and walls forty feet high, designed to keep others out? Is it a place of commerce—a storefront where the best of our time and energy goes into doing business—where those with whom we come in contact are seen, first of all, as potential customers, while our family lives in a small upstairs apartment?

What kind of house are we building? Is our own room the largest and best furnished? Is it a house with a guest room which is ready, comfortable, and well-used, or do we receive visitors by appointment only on an unlisted phone? Is it a house which will stand up to earthquake and flood, or will it collapse when the first real storm hits?

In Genesis, God promises Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Abram will have a great house because God himself will be the architect. Verse 6 says:

“Abram put his trust in the Lord, and because of this the Lord was pleased with him and accepted him.” But in spite of his faith it seems Abram still isn’t convinced he will have such a house. Some strange things start happening. There is a sacrifice. And Abram becomes filled with great fear. No longer because he doubts God’s house plans are really for him, but because he now knows they *are* for him, and he knows what that means!

God explains to Abram that his descendants will become enslaved in a foreign land, and suffer hardships and cruelty for many generations. Perhaps it was hearing of this suffering that finally convinced Abram that God’s promise was real. Suffering was something he could identify with. He knew already that the house God was building through him was one which would be no stranger to the storms of suffering.

We, too, as members of this congregation, are building a house. We remember God’s promise to Abraham that he would have descendants “as numerous as the stars.” Some of you remember the days when it seemed like that was true for our congregation. Sunday School attendance in the hundreds; pews filled to overflowing with Medford’s most respectable citizens; a steady flow of new members of all ages coming to us; multiple pastors providing skilled leadership in every area; maybe even years upon end with little or no financial worries.

As I struggled with this brief passage from Luke, Jesus’ cryptic reference to “your house” intrigued me. What does Jesus mean here? Different translations vary from: *Your house left to you desolate; your house is a waste; your house is a desert; your house is abandoned by God, your house is left empty.* Whatever he meant, it doesn’t sound good! “Your house” may refer to the Temple; it may mean the nation of Israel; it may have to do with the religious institution at Jerusalem.

In spite of the fact that Luke treats the Pharisees a bit more kindly than the other gospel writers, in chapter seven, Luke characterizes the Pharisees as those who “rejected God’s purposes for themselves”<sup>1</sup> – a harsh judgment and condemnation.

Jesus stands in sharp contrast to such an attitude. He knows death will come to him as a result of his ministry, but he will not abandon his mission in order to save himself; Herod and his threats will not hinder his work. Jesus does not retreat in fear due to the dangers that threaten him – epitomized by Herod in this passage. Instead, he is motivated by faithfulness to the path (the “way”) to which God has called him.

Jesus’ ministry and mission was fulfilling God’s promise to Abraham that through Abraham “*all nations would be blessed.*” Jesus was still building that house begun by Abraham.

Jesus mourned Jerusalem. For Jerusalem was the heart of the house God had been building through his people. But Jerusalem would not listen, and was turning away. Jerusalem was building her own house, and God was not included. The lament is touching. The metaphor is that of a mother bird spreading her wings to protect her young. Only in this case it is a tragic metaphor, because Jesus, the one who loves Jerusalem the most, must pronounce her doom.

In our lectionary Bible Study last Wednesday we struggled with this complex and somewhat confusing passage. The structure of the study we are using includes four questions, the last of which is, “What God is calling us to do through the message of this passage?”

We had been looking at how Jesus responded to the difficulties and challenges facing him, including threats to his life. Jesus remained faithful. Nancy’s Zitzner’s comment was, “Shouldn’t we be faithful in the same way? Shouldn’t we “stay the course” here at FPC Medford – continuing to be the downtown church that ministers to people on the west side, no matter what? Isn’t that what God is calling us to do?”

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:30

That's quite a concept, isn't it – that our first priority should be faithfulness to our mission, over our corporate well-being or even our survival as a congregation. We all stopped to think about what Nancy had said. We knew it was right, but could we ever do it? Or is Jesus the only one who is really expected to be faithful to God's call?

What kind of house are we building at 8<sup>th</sup> and Holly? The psalmist challenges us with words just as pointed: "*If the Lord does not build a house, then in vain do the builders labor.*"

Those who choose to include God as a designer and carpenter of the houses they build will certainly encounter hardship and suffering. And yet, God's promises bring more than just difficulties. They bring fulfillment. They bring blessing. They bring joy. They lead us to the place of ultimate closeness to the one who created us: to the fullness of life which Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

Those who include God in their house plans will find themselves surprised again and again. They may have trouble. They may get hurt. But seldom will they suffer the symptoms of emptiness suffered by those who build houses solely for themselves.

In George Elliot's *Romola*, the boy Lillo says:

*I should like to be something that would make me a great man, and very happy besides—something that would not hinder me from having a great deal of pleasure.*

Romola replies:

*That is not easy, my Lillo. It is only a poor sort of happiness that could ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures. We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good.*

What sort of house will we build? My prayer is that it will be a house fashioned by God; a house that will bring blessing to all that enter here.

Grace, mercy and peace; Amen.