

## GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS

The Church is the biggest people movement in the world. Without coercion and despite all obstacles, it spreads across the earth because of him, who by the power at work within us is able to do abundantly above all we ask or think. He displays his power in large congregations of megacities and in small congregations of the Amazon rainforest. He displays it in BVBC. We gather today to praise him, who has been the source of our strength and the strength of our life these past 50 years.

Do you ever wonder what life would have been like, if a disaster had been prevented? For example, what if a nor'easter had shut down all airports from Washington to Boston on September 11? At BVBC we know what life has been like, because disaster was prevented, and it is right and good for us to remember how God saved us from our sins during the past 50 years and give him praise.

### **The Power of Reconciliation**

The birth of this church 50 years ago caused great pain. Our mother was Immanuel Baptist Church at Pennsylvania Avenue and Greenhill Avenue. Several hundred people left Immanuel over theological and church differences. Most who left formed this church and called it Baptist Fellowship Church.

The new church rented space at Friends School in Alapocas Woods for Sunday and Wednesday meetings. Two missionaries, home from overseas, served one year each as interim pastors. Pastor Dan Myers served as the congregation's first pastor from September 1971 to October 1974.

When Pastor Dan resigned, the church immediately approved a pastoral search committee. They found an outstanding candidate, heard him preach, interviewed him, and prepared to present him to the Board of Deacons. Now, the five members of the committee agreed to be unanimous before presenting him to the board. They voted, and the one woman on the committee, Alice Cochran, voted against the candidate. She was gentle, soft-spoken, and she did not change her mind. The candidate never came.

The shine of being a new church had worn off, five years in Friends School was getting old, and the failure to present that candidate precipitated a crisis on the Board of Deacons. At a board meeting in late 1974, the motion was made to disband this church, sell this property, and give missionaries the proceeds. All that has happened here since then waited voiceless for what the board would do. They tabled the motion. The board agreed to pray for a month and decide at the next meeting.

The unexpected happened. At the next meeting, the deacons concluded that their troubles were due to lingering hostility toward people at Immanuel. The solution was not to disband but to be reconciled with Immanuel. It was a humble and humbling

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decision. In an equally humble and humbling decision, the board at Immanuel agreed to meet. The meeting went well. The two boards reconciled with each other and agreed to call for a meeting of reconciliation between the two congregations.

That meeting in January 1975 was painfully frank, but its outcome was liberating. When Carole and I came to Wilmington in May 1975, we did not hear people in either congregation belittle or accuse each other. They acknowledged the heartache (there was plenty to go around), but they said, "We have been reconciled."

Come, let us return to the Lord.

He has torn us to pieces

but he will heal us;

he has injured us

but he will bind up our wounds.

After two days he will revive us;

on the third day he will restore us,

that we may live in his presence.

Let us acknowledge the Lord;

let us press on to acknowledge him.

As surely as the sun rises,

he will appear;

he will come to us like the winter rains,

like the spring rains that water the earth. (Hosea 6:1-3)

### **A Divine Visitation**

Those rains watered the now soft soil of this congregation, and BVBC thrived over the next 15 years. 1984-1985 was a transition time. Two associate staff resigned to take ministries elsewhere, and that fall I accepted a call to be the Senior Pastor at Hinson Baptist Church in Portland, OR. BVBC called a new Youth Pastor, a new Senior Pastor, and later a Singles Pastor. BVBC continued to do well.

In October 1990 Senior Pastor Harry Killbride resigned from here to become Senior Pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C. A ten-month process ensued to find Pastor Killbride's replacement. Not without controversy and some hard feelings within the board and congregation, BVBC asked me to candidate for the position, and I did.

I returned to BVBC as Senior Pastor on August 1, 1991. I had changed in the intervening six years. BVBC had changed. Delaware was changing. The downsizing and outsourcing that now characterize American business affected Wilmington's chemical companies. I watched many a 50-year-old man, hoping to retire with his company, get a golden parachute instead and become a contractor. Unemployment and unfulfilled dreams were something new in a culture shaped profoundly by the Dupont Company.

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Within BVBC we had serious conflicts: staff, theology, board, and personal. We did not resolve them. They came to a head in the board meeting of December 1993. By year's end, 80 or so people, including some church leaders, left BVBC to worship elsewhere. Down the rabbit hole we went once again. We licked our wounds throughout 1994, but the congregation hung together.

None of us thought on January 1, 1995 that it would be a year of Divine visitation to this congregation. But it happened. At a late winter board meeting, our Children's Director, Jane Gerlach, suggested that the board organize a trip for men to go to Washington, D. C. on Memorial Day weekend to a Promise Keepers event. The deacons did it, and 130 men went.

We knew something had changed, when we boarded our bus home on Saturday night. We were going home with a new heart. There was a unity we had not known for years. Men learned to care for each other. Old feuds went away. Later on, friendships with those who left were renewed. Some returned to BVBC. It was good.

This is what the Lord says:

"Stand at the crossroads and look;  
ask for the ancient paths,  
ask where the good way is, and walk in it,  
and you will find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16)

### **Best Laid Plans**

That Memorial Day weekend, in spite of ourselves, we found the good way and walked in it and we found rest for our souls. BVBC thrived over the next 15 years. So much so that we decided in 2005 to build this sanctuary. Preparations to build and fundraising for the project took more than two years. We broke ground in May 2008. Contractors tore down nearly all the original buildings and dug down another 16 inches to accommodate the foundation for the new building. We had a massive hole in the ground between the East and West Wings just in time for the Great Recession of 2008.

We worshiped in this sanctuary for the first time on November 1, 2009. It was a joyful day. We had many joyful occasions afterward, but financial danger dogged us for the next three years. 2010 was uncommonly hard on Lanny Weaver, Len Armstrong, Bill Parsons, and Willie Mah, Chairman of the Board.

The danger brought the Board of Deacons to one of the most difficult decisions a church board can make. The deacons agreed unanimously to terminate two full time pastors and one full time administrative assistant in January 2013.

The board established open forums in which they would try to explain their decision and allow the congregation to question and challenge that decision. The board chairman, Brett Dorsch, and the board vice-chairman, Craig Montgomery, agreed to be the

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face of the board at those forums. Other deacons would be there to back them up. Down the rabbit hole we went once again.

Brett and Craig faced anger, understandable anger. They faced questions, sometimes insistent questions. They responded with courtesy and integrity. They also found support for the decision, not as much or as strong perhaps as they wanted, but real. The meetings went on for several months.

Some people disagreed strongly and decided to leave BVBC and worship elsewhere. Looking back, I am still astonished that their numbers were so few. I felt sad, and I heard deacons express sadness that people had left, but I never heard anyone disparage those who left or those who spoke in anger or asked the most insistent questions. They were our brothers and sisters in Christ, and Christ told us to love one another. I think we might almost have come close to doing it.

People have often remarked how smoothly the succession process went from my retirement in April 2015 to Pastor Nate and Shannan Keeler's call to BVBC in September 2015. The solidarity of the board in the difficult decision of January 2013 and the solidarity of the congregation that followed made that succession possible. And here we are, thriving again in Christ.

Do you not know?

Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.

He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak."

Even youth grows tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;

but those who wait upon the Lord  
will renew their strength.

They shall soar on wings like eagles;  
they shall run and not grow weary,

they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:27-31)

Such have been three manifestations in BVBC of him, who is at work in us to will and to act according to his good pleasure. They are part of our legacy. So, here's what I want you to consider. "Man cannot help loving; his choice is between the fire of self-love and the fire of the love of God." "If you want to do something ... really hard ... to push yourself to the limits ... if you want to learn to be holy and blameless in love before God - there is no better place to do that than" in the Church.

The fire of the love of God in this congregation smolders under ashes of the ordinary. The wind of the Spirit fans those embers into flame and reveals the Church to be the bush that

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burns but is not burned up, the very presence of God on earth in our human flesh. And just think: We get a taste of this beautiful, infuriating, global thing right here at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church. We are blessed.

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