

## Christian Community Presbyterian Church

### 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Worship Service

September 9, 2012

Sermon by Rev. James Brassard “Beneath the Cosmic Tree” Daniel 4:11

I was initially excited when the Golden Anniversary committee assigned me this text in Daniel 4:11 *“and the tree grew great and strong, its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the whole earth.”* I thought it was just for me. I come from Washington State, as does Hal Pease. **We love trees.** For many to be called a “Tree hugger” is a derisive term. Say it to a Washingtonian and they will respond, “You mean you’re not?”

Out there many people actually live high up in the Evergreen trees. Cutting a great big tree down is **sacrilegious.**

Last spring I made very loud complains to both realtors who handled the sale of my next door neighbor’s house. The new owners **insisted** that a huge oak tree, the most majestic tree in the R section, the tree that provided shade for my back yard, be cut down. The new buyer argued that the tree was undermining the driveway and had cracked the concrete floor in the garage.

I angrily told the realtor, “Tell your buyer, fat chance he will ever swim in my pool. “ It’s an idle threat. Who would want to? Without the cooling shade this majestic tree provided, the pool water hovers near 90 degree most of the summer. To further register my disgust, I immediately went out and paid big bucks for three new trees to be planted. I very publicly water and fertilize these new trees weekly. But it’s a futile exercise. A great and glorious tree takes 50 years to grow to maturity.

When I started studying this story from Daniel 4 on August 1st I discovered there is a lot more than meets the eye. First it is a dream by **King Nebachanezzer.**

A King who three chapters later will be murdered in a grisly scene. The scene being the context for the phrase “the handwriting is on the wall.”

In Daniel 4 we find King Nebuchadnezzar at the height of his power and influence. His kingdom is large and very prosperous. The symbol of his rich blessing is this **Cosmic Tree**. A tree whose grandeur and placement in the center of the garden is meant to remind us of the Paradise that existed in the Garden of Eden. Only this tree is far more spectacular than the Tree of Life in the creation story. It grew so tall it touched the sky: the **earthly kingdom touches the heavenly kingdom**. So great was the tree that it was visible to the ends of the earth.

**The dream describes the myriad benefits of this tree...** Its foliage is beautiful providing shelter. Its fruit abundant, providing food for all. Even the animals find shade and the birds nested in its branches.

**The tree is the metaphor for God's ideal kingdom.** It is what believers long for each time we pray the Lord's Prayer asking that "Thy (God's) kingdom come, thy will be done **on earth** as it is in heaven."

The **Cosmic Tree in full bloom describes the hope and reality of the glorious founding of Levitt Bowie.** If there was ever a time and place in American history when it appeared the earthly and the heavenly kingdom might soon merge into one---it was **1962 Bowie**.

Sure other American suburbs were growing rapidly and Protestant churches were springing up all over America. Church attendance was at an all time high.

"IF YOU BUILD IT THEY WILL COME."

But **Bowie was different**. It wasn't constructed for young families trying to escape the decay and poverty of America's cities. Bowie was built to house the scientists coming to send a man to the Moon! NASA was the preferred destination of any brilliant scientist. And although you couldn't openly talk about it back then, Bowie was also the preferred residence for the top flight talent that was staffing those office buildings at Fort Meade. These geniuses worked for what was jokingly called NO SUCH AGENCY. (NSA).

These young leaders were recruited to do the impossible. And they wanted to raise their families in a model community. And can you believe the SIZE AND PRICE OF THE NEW HOMES?

**Time magazine famously called this magical time in JFK's America: Camelot.**

**If America in 1962 was Camelot; then Bowie was the Beta Site.**

Bowie attracted the "Best and the Brightest" with a bold vision of **changing the world**. These young and confident and fearless leaders flooded into this church start up. CCPC had talent in spades.

These bright and bold young men and women brought a problem solving approach to mission. **"If you find a need--fill it."**

Need a pre-school. Start one. No kindergarten in schools. Offer one.

No program for seniors. Convert a no longer needed rancher in a senior center.

Need to help the poor who lived on the other side of town. Start a food pantry.

The town grew until we needed a hospital. So Audrey Scott mobilized the political pressure to secure one.

**In many ways the rapid growth of Bowie and the growth of CCPC are the same story. It is one of clarity of purpose and unmatched confidence.** The old Sunday School song expressed it well: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder—every step goes higher, higher."

**There were still evils out there!** Bill Levitt was very aware that his housing developments thrived because they maintained a white's only policy. He never sold a home to a Black family. Segregation was this country's dirty little secret---maintain by a wink and a nod and some subtle legal maneuvering.

Yet CCPC challenged that dark stain on American idealism. This congregation believed that God's Cosmic Tree was meant to give shelter and food to all people.

At Bill Miller's Memorial Service last spring his son talked about hosting Leon Panetta, then a prominent Presbyterian layman, who was honoring Bill for his work in civil rights. CCPC was willing to risk offending some, in order to extend God's justice for all. Hosting a large group in Washington for "The Poor Peoples March" might not make our neighbors happy, but it's unmistakably the gospel call. This church boldly affirmed the prophetic call, powerfully articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. **"The moral arc of the universe is long ...but it bends towards justice."**

This church start up was not just a local effort. National Council of Church's had its eye on Bowie when word emerged that Levitt's biggest housing project was coming here and that NASA's new headquarters would be located in Greenbelt.

National church leaders wanted to build a strong Protestant church in this highly visible community. The Presbyterians won the right to start the first church and they showered money and attention to this project.

Last fall on my sabbatical I attended a conference at Princeton Seminary. At lunch in the cafeteria I sat next to the conference speaker, a distinguished older man. He asked me the typical conversation starting question, where do you serve? I told him I serve at CCPC (I probably said Christian Community Presbyterian instead of the familiar CCPC) in Bowie, Maryland. He smiled broadly.

He then told me he was a classmate and a close friend of founding pastor Dewey Dodds. He described Dewey as one of the bright stars of the class. He had great charisma. He was gregarious. A great motivator of people. A tireless worker. Dewey, he said had vision and was fearless. He added that when word got out that the denomination was looking for an organizing pastor, everyone wanted this job. Bowie in 1962 was the place to serve.

To echo the language of Daniel 4: "The tree grew great and strong...and from it all living things were fed."

Not all was perfect. Not every decision was the right one. Mistakes were made.

There is one question for which I have never gotten an answer. How could these brilliant engineering minds select a building design with a flat roof—worse yet— a PAGODA designed to intentionally trap water?

I have yet to find one person who has taken responsibility for that decision.

I have come up with my own answer. In the 1960's church architecture, art took precedence over conventional design. The standard truths about engineering were tossed aside to accommodate creativity. I blame it all on the period's infatuation with Frank Lloyd Wright. We had our own version of Falling Waters

**We cannot forget that Daniel is a prophetic book.** It tells the story of God's love and abundant blessing; but it offers a cautionary tale. Prophets have a dual calling: to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable.

And the sin that prophets always warn against is the sin of hubris. The wonderfully benevolent Cosmic Tree of Nebuchadnezzar's dream also reminds us of another ill fated Genesis metaphor: The Tower of Babel.

Hubris was the sin prophets railed against from the beginning of Israel's founding. Joshua warned the people as they prepared to inhabit the Promised Land. Beware of the temptation when you are successful in your new land to forget that it is God who gave you this place. Never forget that it is God's truth, God's justice, and God's way we are to follow.

It is King Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance that brings about his demise. Daniel, like all of the Old Testament prophets warns us to be careful. Saying, **IF** you lose sight of God, and trust only on your own insight and your own wisdom, everything you have worked to build, every ministry you answered God's call to start, everything can be taken away.

We all know cases of great institutions that lost their way and collapsed under the weight of their own hubris. The prophet is not declaring God's vengeance:

there is always mercy in God's corrective love. If you lose your way, Daniel warns, God will cut down the tree—not to kill it --but to help the community of believers get back to the task of building the kind of community that gives shelter and provides nourishment in the first place.

King Nebuchadnezzar took his eye off of God. Doing what the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians calls: worshipping the creature instead of the creator.

I want to close with a few comments on the 50 years of CCPC. Since I have only been here the last 8 years my reflections are the result of what I have read in the church archives and Session minutes and the stories I have heard by long time members. Here are three observations

1. **CCPC has faithfully honored the vision of its founders to be engaged in mission and ministry locally.** CCPC has faithfully attempted to be that Cosmic Tree that tries to provide God's gracious provision to this community.

You might not have known that the Bowie Food Pantry started in the Franks garage. Ed Godfrey arranged the numerous food drives to stock it. For many years, June Utara wrote the checks to people in need. Today the Bowie Interfaith Food pantry is a large ministry. Its operations take up half our CE building. We have vegetable gardens on site and hundreds of volunteers. Over 40 congregations and scores of local businesses and governmental agencies generously support this effort. Over 200 children each month count on the pantry for their Food.

Poverty in Prince Georges County is growing. Our Christmas Families program provides food, clothing and gifts to poor families. Last Christmas, under Roxanne Johnson's ambitious leadership, we served 361 children

We continue to help house the Homeless in the Warm Nights Shelter program. CCPC was a founding member of the original housing coalition; today we are part of a larger and more effective interfaith ministry.

Rex McDaniel started bi-annual mission trips with Habitat for Humanity. Every other year we head off to West Virginia to a Blitz Build. We start with a concrete foundation on Monday and have the house enclosed, shingled, and decked by Friday. So **enthusiastic** is the West Virginia Habitat affiliate about our crew—this year they offered us two homes in the same week. We probably would have finished if the foundations were square.

We have added a vital international mission project. One of society's greatest needs in the future is for **safe drinking water**. CCPC has partnered with "Living Waters for the World" to install water filtrations systems in little villages in Honduras. **The Tanners and Backus's** went to the national training center 5 years ago. Last February 11 people installed our 5<sup>th</sup> system and continued to nurture an ongoing relationship with church groups in that region of Honduras. Our goal is to install one new water system each year.

**We can look with pride about all that we do here at CCPC. We have been true to our founding vision.**

My second observation is related to the scripture reading from Hebrews 12. This familiar text reminds us that we are not alone in our service to God.

The 11<sup>th</sup> chapter in Hebrews lists the honor roll of Biblical history: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Rahab and David and others. They are all part of the great cloud of witnesses, this huge throng of believers who have completed their journey of faith...and who surround us with their love and support.

As CCPC arrives at its 50th anniversary, we cannot forget the departed CCPC faithful who have passed on to the Eternal Kingdom and are part of that throng that offer their unceasing love and support. We honor today those among this church who have lived by faith.

Finally, the past 50 years have been a time of great social change. This change has been accompanied by competing visions of how the church should respond to change. With the numerous strong personalities in this congregation there have been serious disagreements. As the Book of Order says, in the Presbyterian system, "people of good conscience do differ."

So mistakes were made. There were misjudgments. Strong and dedicated members sometimes found themselves on the losing side of a policy or strategic decision. Some here felt they were slighted or their gifts were underappreciated.

As Audrey Scott mentioned in her children's sermon this morning, the church needs to always be about forgiveness and love. There still exists some who harbor deep anger about past decisions. I offer my pastoral suggestion:

It is time to GET OVER IT.

Craig Dykstra, who chairs the Lilly Foundations Religious division, sums up the Presbyterian tradition this way:

*The heart of it is an understanding of God as a gracious, generous god,  
and the proper response of human beings to that generosity is gratitude.*

The author of Hebrews suggests that we keep our focus on gratitude by looking to Jesus as both the "pioneer" –the founder of this great church- and also as the "perfector" –the perfect example of faithful obedience to god. Jesus is the primary and the ultimate model of what it means to be faithful.

Jesus must serve as the source of confidence as we go forward. Jesus is the one whom we look to for strength and encouragement in hard times because Jesus has endured death on the cross and has now taken his place in the presence of God. This has been a wonderful 50 years. With God's help and our continued faithfulness, many more years of God's gracious presence await us. Amen