

LIVING THE LEGACY<sup>1</sup>  
II Samuel 23: 1-7  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
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We have a clear choice: we can live the legacy, or we can leave the legacy. By that I am referring to the legacy we have received here in this church. This place has become a holy legacy for many because of the significant life events that have taken place within these hallowed walls. But we have also received a non-tangible legacy that we would describe in various ways. Words and phrases come to mind: progressive? Community engagement? World vision? Yes, yes, and yes! All these and more come to mind.

But the choice is clear: we can live that legacy, or we can leave that legacy.

I

High above us, on top of the steeple, is a tangible symbol of our legacy. It is a weather vane in the form of a phoenix, recalling the ancient legend of the phoenix bird that rose from its own ashes to become even stronger.

From a devastating fire 70 years ago this church rose, and it has inherited a legacy that can be summed up with two words: progressive and

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creative. Few things in our history stand out quite so much as our progressive stance. Don't confuse the term progressive with the term liberal. Some of us are theologically liberal and some are theologically conservative, but we all inherit a progressive approach to our faith. By that I mean that we are not frozen in time. Our faith grows; it moves; it adapts; it deepens. We appreciate our heritage, but we build on it. We recognize the realities of the present and we adapt. To use the language of science, we believe that God's ways are evolutionary. There is a gradual revealing of the way we are to go. We are not frozen in time, and we are willing to change. The gospel is the same, but our understanding of it changes with the times.

We are progressive, and we are also creative. For centuries, the word "creative" was reserved only for God. Only God can create something out of nothing. But then came the Renaissance, followed by the industrial and scientific and technological revolutions, and people began to think of themselves as sharing the ability to create. Artists and poets and architects and scholars and scientists came to see themselves as creative, not because they were creating something out of nothing, but because they were taking raw materials and putting them together in new ways. This was taking God's gifts and using them in creatively. Creativity and innovation were twins, and this church inherited a legacy of both.

Take Church School, for instance. It began in Worcester because this congregation, under the leadership of Jonathan Going, saw the need. They did not create Church School out of nothing, but they took the raw material of need and combined it with love and innovated! Or take Christian recreation, for instance. Nobody in Worcester thought of building bowling alleys in church until this congregation, with the leadership of Thomas Roy, saw the need for organized, church-sponsored Christian recreation and innovated! Our legacy of creativity means that we love the past but are not bound to repeat the past. We see a need and we innovate!

## II

Now there is a growing feeling within the congregation that the winds of creativity are once again stirring. Spurred by a genuine love for this church and dedication to seeing this church thrive, ideas for enriching our life together are free flowing. There is an eagerness to create structures to meet the spiritual needs of a new generation. There is a yearning for an expansion of our inclusivity, a more serious living out of our progressivism and a fearless living into our spirit-inspired creativity.

How this will work itself out in new structures and new ideas is yet to be seen, but this is a heads-up, an early warning signal, a glimmer of a new sunrise, that we cannot continue indefinitely doing business exactly the way

we have been for the last few decades. There is a new day dawning just as a new century has dawned. It is a time that calls for our best efforts, our renewed commitment, and our finest creativity.

That brings me to the scripture that was read earlier. It describes the famous last words of King David. Think of that, after transforming a whole nation and creating a dynasty that people thought would live forever, he came to his last hours and wanted to say one last word.

Not all of us get to have a deliberate, thoughtful, last statement in life. But here was King David, clearly thinking through his last words, conscious that they would go down in history. He wanted them to be right.

It is telling that this “sweet singer of Israel,” as he has been called, chose to write his last words in poetic form, as a psalm. At heart he was a poet. I think of him wanting to be a king only reluctantly. Administration, diplomacy, budgets, taxes, building projects, the press, the military—all these were his royal world of work. But at heart he was a poet.

And what did he do? He wrote of his legacy. He looked over his life and must have remembered both the good and the bad. He remembered his successes and his failures, his triumphs and his stupidities, his kindness and his cruelty. What a larger-than-life person he was! Even his tragic affair with

Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her rightful husband have become instructive for us. Here are the words he wrote to stand as his poetic legacy.

And what did he write? Instead of glorying in the past, he looked to the future. He described an ideal ruler, someone who one day would succeed him. He was writing about the kind of king he wished he could have been. It is full of regret and hope. For through all of his life he believed that God had made an everlasting covenant with his lineage, and that someday, there would be a king who would fulfill the ideal. His own life had fallen short, but God would someday raise up an ideal king.

So how did he describe this future? Listen to his poetry:

*One who rules over people justly  
Ruling in the fear of God,  
[one who] is like the light of the morning,  
like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,  
gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.*

Just think of this aged king looking to the future and imagining what it would be like. Not only did he foresee wonderful new leadership, but he also compared it to a sunrise: *...like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, gleaming from the rain on the grassy land.* Where do you think that image came from? It certainly was not a part of the daily life of the king. He had been ruling from a

city. He had been living in a palace. He had been in an urban environment. Yet when he thought of a bright future, he remembered his youth when he was a shepherd. He remembered those times when he stayed up all night watching the sheep, protecting them from predators. He had a vivid memory of the sun rising over the horizon, casting its rays over the gleaming wet grass as the sheep began to stir. He never forgot that sight, and when he looked to the future, he thought of the incredible beauty of that sunrise.

### III

During this week of giving thanks, I invite you into an exercise of imagining. I want you to imagine a bright new future for this church. Imagine a thrilling and colorful sunrise on a new day. Imagine a renewed church for a new century. What would our legacy of a progressive and creative congregation look like in the sunrise of a new day?

Our legacy is rich in Christian commitment, rich in ideas, rich in maturity and depth. We can live that legacy; or we can leave it as an historical relic. What a thrill it would be if we quietly determined to live it in our day!