



Faith in Action for 250 Years

250th Anniversary of the Laying of the Cornerstone

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Sunday, September 21, 2008*

There's a directory on the Internet with links to 72,000 genealogy Web sites. Hundreds of thousands of people visit these sites every day seeking just a little more information about who they are, where they come from and what their identity is all about. Another search for "Family Crest" turns up over 36,000 Web sites that claim to help people know more about who they are as a family. I find it fascinating, learning what I can of the tales of my own ancestors, tracing the history. Clearly, many share this interest.

Who are my people? Where do I come from? Who is my God? Whom then shall I serve? Knowing the narrative of our past is what gives us a sense of place in the present, and a vantage point from which to hope for our future.

Well, Happy Birthday St. Peter's! 250 years to the day, and you're still looking trim, ready for adventure. It is a fitting occasion to look back, piece together the memories of where we came from, wonder how that past informs our present opportunities and our future possibilities. Like families, churches have a genetic make-up that gets passed on. My first parish out of seminary in Paterson, New Jersey, was a massive gothic structure built to seat 1400 as the cathedral of the Diocese, which it never was; it had a weekly congregation of some 60 souls when I was there—but we always knew that we were meant to aspire to and accomplish great things—and we did. Later, I served a crummy little church that had suffered decades of uninspired leadership in its youth and knew it would never amount to much—and it never has.

St. Peter's comes from good stock. Planted here as the fruit of the good desires of the people of Christ Church who were eager to worship close to home as the city grew southward from what was then High Street, now Market Street, and had recently expanded as far south as Christian Street; it was time to have a church nearby. We were fortunate that for the first almost 80 years, as we grew, matured and took root, we were united to Christ Church, enjoying the stability of one rector and one vestry.

The Library Company of Philadelphia has an oil painting of the house of Jacob Duche, which used to stand on the northeast corner at 3rd and Pine. Mr. Duche was the rector in the 1770s. It is a fanciful painting, depicting as it does a house standing alone in a great, green field. Fanciful, because there would have been many other houses by that date, but I find the painting delightful because it prompts me to imagine how different this neighborhood looked, with the river nearby, how massive this building must have been when it rose during the years 1758 to 1761.

When people lay the cornerstone for a church, I imagine it comes from a strong sense of commitment to the place, and they envision a certain degree of permanence, bearing dreams of longevity and faithfulness. Here. We will build a temple, here. This is where we live. This is where we shall worship God. There is a certain permanence. But to lay the cornerstone of a church is really to commit oneself to an adventure, to a journey. Our building is solid, but from the word "go," a living body was set in motion.

In laying a cornerstone, even stronger than the desire for permanence is the desire to meet a current need, a pressing need. As is often the case, laying the cornerstone of St. Peter's represented the desire of the people to serve the people—in this neighborhood. It's a simple desire, really; yet, very powerful: to be the people of God, the living stones of a temple, to serve the people of God, all whom God may send and we may reach from this central locus.

In the New Testament lesson we heard: "Come to [Christ], a living stone, . . . and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house. . . ." To be a spiritual house is to be a place where the presence of God is known. In laying the cornerstone of a temple, our forbearers committed to this purpose: to be a place where—and the means by which—the presence of God is known.

For 250 years thus far, and likely for at least another 250 beyond us, we begin and end by serving this neighborhood—the needs of the people around us. Individually, we are mere wayfarers pausing for a time—perhaps even the duration of our lives—in this place. Corporately, we are the abiding presence of God, serving in prayer and deed the people of this neighborhood and city.

Well, despite the firm intentions of our founders, our building was not assured; the lottery to raise funds to build fell short. So we began by taking a risk and built anyway, built on faith.

We have always engaged the theological, ecclesiastical and political issues of the day. We debated and took positions on whether these colonies ought to declare independence from Great Britain, whether or not to fight for that freedom. We participated in the counsels of the Continental Congress when this nation was born. We led the way in the counsels of the church when the Episcopal Church was created from our roots in the Church of England. We worshiped here as slaves and as the owners of slaves; as Christians and as Americans, we debated the rights and privileges of those who were enslaved, who rightly demanded their liberty.

As the city grew, so did we. When the city struggled, so did we. We've had boom years with thousands on the books, and bust years when we were hard pressed to field a vestry.

Well into the 1800s we were defined by the activities of the river and the port. Early on, we committed to supporting the neediest among our neighbors, opening St. Peter's House at Front and Pine to provide training and support for dock workers and their families. St. Peter's School was created to offer education to the children of these families. Even into the mid-twentieth century when the school had become a choir school, most of the young men who attended found through it great opportunities otherwise unknown in their South Philly neighborhoods.

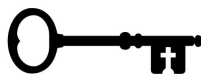
In recent history, we've been shaped by those of you who came to the city in the 1960s and early 1970s believing—despite the derelict state to which much of this area had fallen—that this neighborhood could thrive once more. You debated how much of the old to destroy, how much of it to save or restore, where to place the highways; and you invested your lives in rejuvenating St. Peter's, the other congregations round about and the schools. Your pioneering spirit defines us to this day. More recently, we've recognized that we no longer need to focus our energies on rebuilding just our own neighborhood because, in many regards, we are secure, have made it—for the next chapter. So we've turned our energy and compassion outward once more, serving our neighbors through The Food Cupboard and, most recently, through Camp Get-Along.

It is said that this building is much the same as when it was built—with later additions of the grand organ case, the tower and steeple and enclosed stairways to meet the fire marshal's code. Even so, it was not always thus. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the windows were filled with stained glass. As recently as the early 1960s, I believe, great velvet drapes covered the upper windows—that we might be appropriately shrouded in mystery.

There is much about this beautiful building that each of us appreciates. I ask that we note the doors. There are four of them, of equal stature, reflecting the Quaker influence favoring equality among all, opposing anything that suggests hierarchy among God's people. Four doors in each corner—southwest, southeast, northeast and northwest. To me, these doors announce that God's temple is open to one and to all in every quadrant, every direction. Wherever you are coming from, these doors are open to you. To the extent that most of us enter through one or another is metaphor for the work that lies ahead: to open each of the doors, all of the doors, to enter in and to go forth in every direction.

In the service for the consecration of a new church, the warden offers this prayer: "Lord Jesus, make this a temple of your presence and a house of prayer. Be always near us when we seek you in this place. Draw us to you, when we come alone and when we come with others, to find comfort and wisdom, to be supported and strengthened, to rejoice and give thanks. May it be here, Lord Christ, that we are made one with you and with one another, so that our lives are sustained and sanctified for your service" (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p.568).

As we mark this 250th Anniversary, we remember where we came from, we give thanks for the vision and courage of our forbears, we ask God's grace be upon us to sustain and inspire us, and we commit ourselves anew to the adventure ahead, to serve the people of this neighborhood and city, to put our faith in action for all the years of our life.



Open hearts. Open minds.