Message: If You Build It, He Will Prepare the Leadership

I have a question for moms here today: “What is the best Mother’s Day gift you have ever received?” Monique Summers, resident of North Bellport, NY, would likely say that her best Mother’s Day gift is a home for her and her children. In fact, on this very day—Mother’s Day—a group of moms from the Long Island Habitat for Humanity are working on a home that will soon be given to Monique and her two children, Alicia and Haniif. “Women Build on Long Island” was the idea of Kathy Schaeffer, who had a dream of building homes for others. Many dream of building themselves a home; I myself have a dream like that, but the dream of building a home for someone else is a very special story.

The Bible relays the compelling story of a man with a dream to build a home for someone other than Himself. The man’s name was David, but there is a backstory. God raised up, from the humblest of roots, a nation whose calling was to proclaim and live out the heart of God. That nation became known as Israel. They were a nomadic people, and as such, their place of worshiping God was actually a large kind of tent, which was known as the tabernacle. The nation’s first king was Saul, but its most famous king, even to this day, was a man named David.

As King, David was remarkably successful and ended up being pretty wealthy. He ended up building a grand home of cedar for himself. In building a home for himself, however, he had a troubling thought, which he shared with a friend:

*After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, “Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.”* 2 Samuel 7:1-2, NIV

This was the spark of a dream that began to grow in David’s heart. It turns out that it was a dream in God’s heart as well, but He had a different vision of the house than David did. David, with the best of intentions, wanted to build a house in which God could live or dwell, but God sent Him a message saying that He doesn’t live in buildings of cedar or stone; He was happy with a tent, which perhaps pictured his availability to meet with people where they were. At the same time, God did have a dream for a house (or temple) made of stone. God expressed his dream through the prophet, Isaiah: *for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.* (The Bible, Isaiah 56:7, NIV) God loved the idea of a house where people of all nations could meet Him and pray to Him and be reconciled to Him.

And so God brought together His dream for a house and David’s dream for a house, and God shaped a plan for constructing this temple. David had the idea, but it really had begun in the heart of God, and God shaped the vision for the kind of building He wanted it to be.

We find ourselves today in a somewhat similar situation. We worship God today in something like a tent. We loaded all of our gear into this building today and we’ll pack it up in a couple of hours and hit the road until next week, when we’ll unpack and pack it up again. There is a lot to like about his setting, and God has blessed
us here, but we have a dream of erecting a building for God. We are not, of course, looking to build Him a place to stay, but we are looking to build a house where people can encounter and meet with God. We are looking to build a house where people of all nationalities and from all walks of life can be graced and cared for. We are looking to build a house where people can be connected with God. It is part of a dream that emerged in the heart of our elders about five years ago, and we believe that God was the source of that dream.

And here is what I want to tell you this morning. When the building dream is from God and for God, He will raise up the leaders to bring it to reality. Turning a dream into a building requires leadership, and God will raise up the leadership required to make the dream a reality. As most of you have learned, however, God can be very surprising in His choices of leaders, as the people of Israel learned when they were planning the construction of a temple for God. David had been casting the vision for the building and preparing to raise the funds to build it. He gathered a sizable group of his people together to share an announcement:

David summoned all the officials of Israel to assemble at Jerusalem: the officers over the tribes, the commanders of the divisions in the service of the king, the commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds, and the officials in charge of all the property and livestock belonging to the king and his sons, together with the palace officials, the mighty men and all the brave warriors. King David rose to his feet and said: “Listen to me, my brothers and my people. I had it in my heart to build a house as a place of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, for the footstool of our God, and I made plans to build it. But God said to me, ‘You are not to build a house for my Name, because you are a warrior and have shed blood.’

“Yet the LORD, the God of Israel, chose me from my whole family to be king over Israel forever. He chose Judah as leader, and from the house of Judah he chose my family, and from my father’s sons he was pleased to make me king over all Israel. Of all my sons—and the LORD has given me many—he has chosen my son Solomon to sit on the throne of the kingdom of the LORD over Israel. 6 He said to me: ‘Solomon your son is the one who will build my house and my courts, for I have chosen him to be my son, and I will be his father. I will establish his kingdom forever if he is unswerving in carrying out my commands and laws, as is being done at this time.’ “So now I charge you in the sight of all Israel and of the assembly of the LORD, and in the hearing of our God: Be careful to follow all the commands of the LORD your God, that you may possess this good land and pass it on as an inheritance to your descendants forever. (The Bible, 1 Chronicles 28:1-8, NIV)

David reminds the people about their God, the God who chooses unpredictable leaders. That is, in fact, how David, a shepherd boy, ended up being the king of Israel. David was well-loved and respected. They were glad that God brought them a surprising leader, but I’m not sure how glad they were when David told them God had another surprising leadership idea. David was going to be replaced as king. Furthermore, he would not be completing the temple building project. I have to wonder how that news went over.
For many of the people in range of David’s voice, he was the only king they had known. God has blessed his leadership. He is the one who had communicated this dream of building a house for God. Naturally, they expected that he would be the one to build it. He was a great king. This building project would be an enormous undertaking that would require someone with His influence and wisdom and leadership. But now they are hearing that God had prepared David for Phase 1 of the building project, but not phase 2. David would start the project, but he would not complete it. God would raise up another leader to complete the project. That sounds well enough, but I have to wonder how the people of Israel reacted to that emotionally.

I’m certain there was sadness, and I’m pretty sure there was discouragement and fear and even anger. I think those are the kinds of things I would be feeling. And they had questions, I’m sure. What happens now? What will happen to our nation? Will things ever be the same? Oh, and what about this temple we want to build for God—will we be able to do that?

We find ourselves in a somewhat similar situation. Most of you got the news this weekend that in about a year, I’ll be stepping down as the Senior Pastor of Hope Church. We used multiple communication venues to try and get the word out, but it is possible that some of you are hearing this for the first time. In a letter and e-mail sent out this weekend, I told the story behind the news.

When I went into college, I sensed God’s clear direction that He wanted me to serve as a Pastor. While in college, he reshaped that and put on my heart to start a church in Agawam, Massachusetts, which I did, and I served as a pastor there for nine years. Eight years ago, I came here, sensing God’s direction once again to serve as a pastor. Truth be told, I expected that I would serve as a lead pastor of a church for the rest of my life. Over the last several months, however, I have sensed that God is moving me in a more specialized direction.

I have been using a football analogy. My role as Senior Pastor is similar to the role of a head football coach. He provides a kind of overall leadership, but has a variety of staff members who provide specialized direction: quarterbacks coach, running backs coach, offensive coordinator, etc. I sense that God is leading me to take one of those more specialized roles. Specifically, I believe it is time for me to devote my primary time and energy into teaching, evangelism, and mission outreach.

One very specific dimension of this has to do with writing. For some time now, I have wrestled with a clear sense that I need to pursue some specific writing projects. I feel like God has given me a theme that needs to go to print, a concept that can help people free up more resources to serve God and people worldwide. Another book specifically designed to help connect seekers to God continues to tug at my heart as well. Nearing 50 years of age, I sense that God is leading me now to specialize and, through writing and teaching, to help mobilize Christians to proclaim Jesus and meet desperate needs worldwide. And in ten months, I am going to step toward that new direction, because I believe it is what God is leading. I know that, for some of you, this is difficult news.
Perhaps you can understand best how the people of Israel reacted when they heard the news that David would be stepping down as king and that a new king would be coming. You know something of the emotions they were feeling. You have a pretty good feel of the questions they were asking. Questions about the future, questions about the church, questions about the great building project. After all, the Hope Church voice for the dream of our new building has come from me. You might naturally assume that I was the source of the building vision, but it actually did not work that way. There was no point where I came to the team with a grand building plan, which they then dutifully supported. In reality, it emerged in a series of gatherings of our Elder Team. We became convinced at a point that it was the clear leading of God for us to sell our old building and take steps toward building a new house that could open new doors for connecting our community with God and providing blessing for people locally and globally. We believe that God gave us the vision, and that is why we took the radical step to pursue it. That is why I have been casting the vision for several years, and now, we are on the verge of raising up the building. Land has been purchased. Design plans have been drawn up. We are seeking God as to what we can give to make the project a reality.

And suddenly, we are now talking about a change in leadership. How could that be? Of course, I would be the one to bring the project to full completion, right? Of course, King David would be the one to lead the people into the new building for the very first time, right? What may have been hardest for the people of Israel to embrace was the reality that God actually planned for someone else to complete the project. I am quite sure that some did not feel like it was a very good plan at all. David would be the obvious choice to lead the project.

Ultimately, God knows who is best to lead any project. In reality, without God, we can’t do any worthwhile project. More important than the leader is the God behind the leader. God is the Ultimate Leader of our project, and He knows the best way to bring it about. Human leaders are very important in God’s Church. In fact, “leadership” is one of our nine Hope Church core values, but another core value is “prayer,” which recognizes that nothing of any value will happen at Hope Church without the active intervention of God. He will raise up the leadership necessary to complete His dreams for our church. He has been doing that all along.

The fact is that He gave the vision for this building to a team on which I’m proud to serve. He has used me to cast vision for the building project and to begin the process of raising the necessary funds to build it (just like David did). He has brought to us someone to oversee the actual building project in Gerard Ciccarello. He has given us an extremely capable Administrative Pastor in Tom Ingala to help us work out numerous logistical issues with construction and fundraising. And He will ultimately bring to us another leader to work alongside them to help complete the project. God, the Ultimate Leader of Hope Church, is shaping just the leaders we need for this hour and the leaders we will need a year from now.

How is this all going to work out? Can we pull off such a sizable task in a time of leadership transition? This was the question the people of Israel were asking. David knew this, and so he carefully chose his words to the people and to his son,
Solomon. Because he knew that the God who gave the building vision was ultimately the One Who would bring it about, here are the concluding words he gave:

David also said to Solomon his son, “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished. The divisions of the priests and Levites are ready for all the work on the temple of God, and every willing man skilled in any craft will help you in all the work. The officials and all the people will obey your every command.”
(The Bible, 1 Chronicles 28:20-21, NIV)

We know what David’s listeners could not have known as they heard him speak. We know that after David died, an amazing temple was constructed. We know that under Solomon’s leadership, the project soared. In fact, the building whose construction he led is known today as Solomon’s Temple. God knew what he doing then, and he knows what he is doing now. Now, I am not saying that our new building will be known as Tom’s temple or Gerard’s church or Paul’s Palace. What I am saying is that they, along with new leadership, will be used by God to bring God’s vision for Hope Church to completion.

It is why I can confidently echo the words that David spoke to his people. “Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the LORD is finished!