

## **Meadowbrook Congregational Church**

### **“A Tale of Faith”**

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#### **Isaiah 51**

<sup>1</sup>Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. <sup>2</sup>Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many. <sup>3</sup>For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song.

<sup>4</sup>Listen to me, my people, and give heed to me, my nation; for a teaching will go out from me, and my justice for a light to the peoples. <sup>5</sup>I will bring near my deliverance swiftly, my salvation has gone out and my arms will rule the peoples; the coastlands wait for me, and for my arm they hope. <sup>6</sup>Lift up your eyes to the heavens, and look at the earth beneath; for the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and those who live on it will die like gnats; but my salvation will be for ever, and my deliverance will never be ended.

#### **Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-12**

<sup>1</sup>Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup>Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. <sup>3</sup>By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup>By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, ‘as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.’

A college professor prepared a test for his soon to be graduating seniors. The test questions were divided into three different categories and the students were told that they could only answer questions from one of the categories to complete the test. The first category had the hardest questions, the second- easier questions, and the third had the simplest questions of all.

Upon completion of the test, those students who had chosen to answer questions in the first category were all given A's. Those who had chosen the second category were automatically given a B. Finally, those who had chosen the easiest category of all, were given the grade of C. It did not matter how many questions the students had answered right or wrong. Only the difficulty of the question influenced the grade. Some of the students were frustrated with the grading of the papers and asked the professor to explain what he was looking for in such an examination. He smiled at them and said, "I wasn't testing your knowledge. I was testing your aim."

As a lover of history, and as a college history major, I have always been a bit troubled by one of the most famous quotes attributed to automotive giant Henry Ford. Most people have heard it before. Ford was to have once said, "History is bunk." I'm not sure what bunk is but I know that it is not a very good thing! What I didn't know what was Ford said immediately after his "history is bunk" statement. He went on to say this, "History is tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today." I still can't say that I agree with Ford's opinion of history, but there is something there is slightly more palatable to my ears. There is some value just in knowing that all of us are making history as we live through these confusing and demanding present days.

We live in times that perhaps even at best can be called discouraging. Our nation is engaged in a war on terror and our young men and women are actively fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is a conflict escalating in the Middle East, more blood being shed over ancient and bitter hostility. Our economic woes continue to spiral. Layoffs, fear of layoffs, rising prices, shrinking retirement accounts, and the collapse of the auto industry have left us breathless with worry. Things may get worse before they get better. We wonder if things can change. We wonder if our best days might be found on the yellowed pages of a history book.

Our community of faith is also experiencing a moment in time that is perhaps at best uncertain. It is no secret that we have budget woes. Many churches across the country and most here in southeastern Michigan are in the same situation. Our rather large mortgage intensifies the problem. We are at the time in our church calendar when our Board of Trustees must present a budget for our operation in 2009 so there is extra attention to our shortfall. The cold hard facts are not pretty and we are trying to tighten our belts.

Other things feel different here at Meadowbrook. The choir is missing their paid section leaders, something that has been a valuable piece of our music tradition for years. Of course this is our first Sunday in over nine years without Patrick Kuhl as our Minister of Music. Patrick's resignation surprised us and shook us up. Our members and friends seem to have had more than their share of accidents, surgeries, or illnesses recently. While we rejoice in the nearly full slate of officers the Nominating Committee will present next week at our Annual Meeting, we still despair about the priority of other activities in our modern world. People today are less willing to offer their time and energy to the church. Many today would rather be served like a consumer at worship than to serve in the worship of God. While the so-called megachurches thrive, mainline traditional churches like ours are befuddled by societal changes. It may be easy to think that the glory days of our faith, our tradition, and our church were in the past when things were so much easier.

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews begins with these words, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Some religious people may define faith as a set of truths to which one must hold a belief. But the writer of Hebrews seems to define it in a different way. Faith is an attitude about what is coming tomorrow. It is a life based on hope for

the future. Faith is the perception of the presence of God in all things: in remembering the great acts of history, in celebrating a holy presence this day, and in trusting that God will be there in our tomorrow.

It seems to me that the writer of this passage brings up historical examples, but not as a reminder of how good the “good old days” were. The writer brings up history to remind us, much as Henry Ford did, that history is always created when people act faithfully in the present. The lessons of history are not intended to be just a nostalgic trip down memory lane, recalling how great things were back then and lamenting how terrible they might be today. And history is not supposed to be an excuse to stay the same, to ignore the possibility of change, allowing your past to determine who you are in the present and who you will be in the future. Abraham and Sarah did not let their insignificance of their past nor the hopelessness of their present diminish their participation in the building of the future. God was calling them to do some rather wonderful but improbable things. They couldn’t see them. They could only imagine them. God was testing their aim. It was faith that moved them. Their lives were a tale of faith.

Evangelist and author Tony Campolo gives wonderful inspirational speeches to inner city children all over the country. “Let me tell you this,” he will say to the kids. “It is not as important where you came from as it is in terms of where you are going. What are your dreams? What are your visions for the future? I am here to tell you that people are more influenced by their dreams and their visions than anything that has happened in their yesterdays.”

Poet Shel Silverstein writes,  
Listen to the mustn’ts.  
Listen to the don’ts.  
Listen to the shouldn’ts,  
The impossible, the wont’s  
Listen to the never haves,  
Then listen close to me.  
Anything can happen, child.  
Anything can be.

It is easy at times like these times, to concentrate on the negative stuff that is reality. It is sad that most of our discussion in our church governing boards will be about budget shortfalls and limits instead of visions and dreams. It is hard to dream when our energies are taken with choices that ensure our survival.

Yet as a community of faith we cannot afford to give up on the future just to wallow in the pressing needs of the present. We cannot be so focused on budgets and shortages that we lose our imaginations. We are not to be so afraid of the darkness that we stop planning on where we will shine our light. Where are we going as a church? Where does God want to take us together? What do we want tomorrow to look like?

In many places, the Bible teaches us that without dreams and without vision, the people perish. When we act upon that which we hope for, we find the hand of God outstretched toward us and we become the people and the community that God wants us to be. This is the time for us to show God our aim. We need each other. Now is the time to do something: to join the choir, to volunteer to teach Sunday School or to staff the nursery, to greet or to usher, to seriously consider increasing our financial pledge if we are able, to develop a creative way to enhance the church’s revenue, to invite a neighbor or friend to worship, to participate in a mission project that

will lift up another in God's name, or to simply be present in worship, for even your presence here means so very much!

Abraham and Sarah lived a tale of faith. They had an attitude about the future. They believed that if they sought God's intention, and gave of themselves as God desired, they would be a part of God's better day. And so it can be for us. While we may desire more comfortable times and easier decisions, those things will not define us. We will be measured by those who follow us in terms of how well we followed our dreams and how faithful we were in being energized by God's vision.

Winston Churchill was giving a speech in the House of Commons one day, eloquently attacking a political opponent in a way that perhaps only a man like Churchill could do. At the end of the speech, Churchill said this, "History will say that I am right." With that he turned and started walking away from the podium. Suddenly he paused and returned to the stand. He then added these words, "I know history will say that I am right because with my deeds I shall write the history."