

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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9/17/06

## **Measuring Lines**

Zechariah 2:1

The laying of the cornerstone of this church was the culmination of a two-day celebration. The congregation gathered at 4:00 p.m. on Sunday afternoon at First Presbyterian Church. Regular worship was being held at First Church because Westminster's downtown building had already been sold and demolished. The celebration resumed at 4:00 p.m. Monday, September 17 at an empty field where construction of this church had begun.

As I reviewed historic information in preparation for this 100-year anniversary I learned that I am not the first Dr. Lee to serve this congregation. Presiding at both cornerstone services was an interim pastor named J. Beveridge Lee (no family connection to me). At the Sunday afternoon service the first Dr. Lee preached a sermon from Zechariah 2:1 entitled, "Measuring Lines."<sup>1</sup> I have chosen the same text and title for my sermon today. We don't have any record of what J. Beveridge Lee said in that sermon 100 years ago. But we can assume that he chose this text because it was addressed to people in transition.

Zechariah was a prophet who directed his message to people facing very serious challenges. He was one of the Jewish exiles who had returned home after many years of forced residence in Babylon. When they returned they were shocked to find the temple destroyed and Jerusalem in ruins. They had to rebuild the structures of their lives. The prophet speaks to people who are in despair over what they have lost. The ruins of the temple stand as a painful symbol of all that has gone wrong.

I wonder what connections J. Beveridge Lee made between these despairing former exiles and this congregation which had no building and no installed pastor in 1906. We know the church they left behind was a large and impressive building in downtown Springfield. It had the largest seating capacity of any auditorium in the city. We also know that the congregation struggled mightily to pay off a \$31,000 debt in the years following its construction in 1871. The financial Panic of 1873 put the church in serious danger of bankruptcy. The local Catholic bishop inspected the building in the hope of buying it at a forced sale. The congregation found a way to weather that storm.<sup>2</sup> But in 1905, the church accepted an offer to sell the building and began a three-year period of exile in which it depended on the hospitality of sister congregations.

The printed histories of this congregation do not offer a very compelling reason for the sale of the 1871 building. The noise of the trains and streetcars are cited as reasons for the move. I suspect the more important reasons were the ones that were not openly stated. This was a 600-member congregation in 1905. It would not have been easy for a congregation of that size to worship in a 1,200-seat sanctuary. Neither the city nor the church had experienced the explosive growth that was anticipated by church leaders when the building was designed in the 1860s. The "build it and they will come" philosophy had not worked. All those empty seats were a constant reminder of their failure to achieve their ambitious goals for growth.

The people who laid the cornerstone in 1906 were exiles who had to deal with their own sense of loss. The old church had been torn down and in the rubble lay their broken dreams. It never became what they wanted it to be.

It was in the rubble of broken dreams that Zechariah believed that he was called to do ministry. He wanted his people to know that God was at work among the ruins of Jerusalem. One of the issues he had to address was the fact that the people could not afford to build a temple that was as large or as lavish as Solomon's Temple. They had to find a way to adjust their expectations. Zechariah's message to these despairing former exiles is communicated through a series of visions. The third vision is found in chapter 2. In this vision Zechariah sees a man who is working in the temple ruins. The man is measuring the dimensions of Jerusalem's ruined walls. He is taking these measurements for the purpose of rebuilding them just the way they were. He expects the new Jerusalem to be exactly like the old. He represents the longing of the returning exiles to recover what they have lost.

In the vision an angel appears to tell the young man to forget about measuring lines. He is wasting his time and energy on a project that can never succeed. Their broken dreams can never be recovered. The angel tells the young man that the new Jerusalem will be nothing like the old Jerusalem. God does not want to give them what they have lost. God wants to give them something better. God wants to give them a Jerusalem without walls. God wants a new humanity where the old walls of division are broken down. Zechariah's vision anticipates the later vision of the Apostle Paul who wrote in Ephesians that Christ would be the cornerstone where a divided humanity would come together.

When the first Dr. Lee warned the congregation not to measure the lines of the old church, he may have spoken of the architecture of the new one. It would seat 650 worshipers rather than 1,200. It would embody a new vision for church architecture in America for which Ralph Adams Cram was a leading proponent. But I suspect that the members already knew this. They understood this new vision. They knew the old lines would no longer work.

But I wonder if he was also challenging the congregation to give up the broken dream of being a mega-church so that they could more fully embrace the dream that inspired the founding of the church. When it was organized in 1835 under the name of Second Presbyterian Church it was known in this city as the abolitionist church. Members were leaders in the Underground Railroad which helped slaves to make their way to freedom. In 1848 a family of former slaves were received into the membership of this church. Clinton Conkling who chaired the building committee in 1906 remembered those days. His claim to fame was an event from his childhood. He was the messenger who carried the news from the Springfield telegraph office to his father's friend, Abraham Lincoln, that Lincoln had won the Republican nomination for the presidency. Many years later Conkling told of a childhood experience that was just as formative. He had friends in the church who had to cancel a Saturday outing because the family horse was being used to help slaves escape. These memories had shaped the identity of the people who laid the cornerstone for this building.

Those who gathered 100 years ago today sang a hymn which included these words:  
Grant that we who here today  
Rejoicing this foundation lay  
May be in very deed Thine own  
Built on the precious Corner-stone.<sup>4</sup>

## Endnotes

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1. From the worship bulletin for the laying of the cornerstone in 1906.
2. Address of D. S. Johnson, *Second Presbyterian Church Historical Data*, Volume I, C. L. Conkling, pages 150-153.
3. Clinton Conkling's "History of Second Presbyterian Church," page 9 (written about 1910).
4. From the worship bulletin for the laying of the cornerstone in 1906.