

“Celebrating Our Heritage by Preparing for Our Future”

Acts 2:42-47

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke

Rise Baptist Church

Stone Mountain, Georgia

May 4, 2008

It all began at Idlewood Elementary School on September 15, 1968. One hundred one people assembled in the auditorium to conduct a worship service and discuss the possibility of beginning a new church. Their dreams became reality in record time. Almost one year to the date, September 14, 1969, Smoke Rise was officially constituted as a church with one hundred sixty charter members. This was due in large part to the encouragement and support from Briarlake Baptist Church under the leadership of Dr. Hoffman Harris.

What was important to these charter members as they charted a new course for themselves and many others to follow? Based upon what I see, it was the same things that were important to the early followers of Christ as Luke shares in Acts 2:42-47. Let’s examine this passage this morning to see what similarities we can discover.

It appears to me that building community was important to the early Christians. “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayers. Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” Acts 2:42-47.

One of my earliest memories of Kate and Jack, my newest grandchildren, occurred a day or two after they went home from the hospital. They were lying together in their bassinette, asleep on their stomachs. I could not help but notice, however, that they were holding hands. Jack and Kate had stretched out their arms until they found each other and then clasped hands.

They had not known life without each other. For nine months they shared living space and after being born, they did not want to be without each other. Already life was too intimidating to face alone.

Immediately after Jesus ascended to be with his Father, what did his followers do? They began reaching out to each other. They did not want to be without each other, either. Their mission and challenge were too intimidating to face alone.

They wanted to become like family to one another so that no one would feel alone in a dangerous and scary world. Pain, sorrow, grief, hardship, want and even mistakes were meant to be shared with loving and caring people, and when needs were met with overwhelming generosity and grace, they believed Jesus was honored.

No wonder 3,000 were added to the church. As Bo Prosser often states, “People go where they know they have been prepared for and cared for.” The early church was a joyous community of believers respected by the wider society and we all know that nothing is more attractive to an outsider than a friendly, happy, welcoming, grace-filled church. It is a safe place to fall and heal.

I believe this is one of Smoke Rise’s strengths. Quite frankly, I know of no church that nourishes its wounded back to health better than this one. In many ways, Smoke Rise has been a hospital for wounded souls.

This is because our members feel that life is about love, not wealth, servanthood, not power, sharing, not hoarding, liberation, not oppression, mercy, not vengeance and goodness, not evil. Community can be built upon these core values!

What else do we know about the early church? Learning was important to them. Luke wrote that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.

What do you think the apostles taught? I believe they shared everything they could recall that Jesus said and did. They taught what he said about adopting values, arranging priorities, being wise stewards, relating to others, responding to enemies, understanding God, overcoming adversity, accepting challenges, conquering temptation and achieving potential. No doubt they relayed stories from Jesus' life that helped their listeners more clearly understand the abundant life.

I imagine the dialogue continued long into the night as the apostles taught and the people asked questions. The give and take had to be fascinating as they discovered the meaning of Jesus' words and deeds for their own lives. They were on a search for truth, knowing all of them could contribute.

One of the characteristics of Smoke Rise that means so much to me is this hunger and thirst for righteousness. I believe the members of this church want to know about the words and deeds of Jesus, too. We are also on a journey of self-discovery that leads to wisdom and understanding.

Clichés and easy answers will not suffice. We want to probe the mysteries of God and life. For us, this is a lifelong journey of shared teaching and learning because we believe that, as Tom Ehrlich writes, "faith requires curiosity and a will to experience reality. Our eyes and ears must always be open and our desire to experience the world must remain keen."

In addition, we want to know where God is at work in the world so we can join Him. Our concept of stewardship and our mission strategy have grown out of this quest.

Luke also tells us that prayer was important to the early followers of Jesus. They not only reached out to one another, but also God through prayer. They knew life was bigger than they were and they needed help from above. They looked to God for wisdom, guidance, direction, strength, courage, confidence, forgiveness and peace. They asked God to help them model grace and mercy as they followed in the footsteps of Jesus. They also prayed for one another as friends faced problems and challenges.

Smoke Rise is a praying church, too. Personal and intercessory prayers are voiced everyday as we share this common journey. What a difference it has made in all our lives.

One other thing was important to the early followers of Jesus, and that was worship. They shared communion with one another as they remembered the sacrifice of Jesus and lifted their voices in praise for God's goodness and faithfulness. I'm not surprised. Fellowshiping with others, giving and receiving the necessities of life, learning and growing as disciples and praying for personal and common needs naturally lead to worship. Worship flows from grateful hearts and they were grateful people.

So are we. Worship flows from our hearts, too, because of our gratitude for our relationships with God and one another. To be a part of this wonderful family of faith also leads us to lift our voices in praise.

Let me conclude with the words I wrote in the 40th Anniversary letter you received from me a couple of weeks ago. They reveal my heart.

"On many occasions, I have talked about my love and appreciation for Smoke Rise Baptist Church. I believe strongly that our community and world need a church like Smoke Rise. I know I do! Let me explain what I mean by this.

People need a church that accepts them where they are on their journey and offers to accompany them along their way. People are starving for community, encouragement and hope. They need a church that can help them make sense of life and embrace them when it doesn't. They need a church that will help them identify their gifts and empower them to use them to make the world better.

They need a church that reflects the goodness of God and brings this out in them. They need a church that binds their wounds with grace and gives them time to heal. They need a church that will love their children and grandchildren and be good role models.

They need a church that stirs their hearts to worship and connects them to this gracious God revealed through the life of Jesus. They need a church that offers a faith that replaces guilt with forgiveness, despair with hope, hate with love, fear with confidence, confusion with direction, loneliness with companionship and sorrow with joy.

Smoke Rise is this church! Now, it is up to us to do our part to make sure Smoke Rise will be here for the next generation."

Will you join us on this mission of love and faith? We welcome you with open arms.

