

All Things Carpenter

Text: Genesis 6: 13-16; Matthew 7: 24-29; I Corinthians 3: 10-15

Rev. Dr. Geordie Campbell

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I had a nifty time with my bible this past week. Quite simply, I was curious to find as many references as I could that refer to building a house. This may not surprise anyone, as you know it's the premier topic of conversation for Pam and me these days.

And more than just being curious about the actual building of a house my search sent me looking for all things carpenter I could find on the sacred pages. It was something like a treasure hunt as I filled up my toolbox.

I read about cubits and gopher wood: these being the measure and material in the tale of Noah's Ark (though some translations say it was cypress). The story has been with us for centuries. Whether it's mythological or real as sawdust is left for us to decide.

More: I read of how certain species of cedar were considered prime building material for their qualities of length and strength. The cedars of Lebanon were tops and were used in the temple because they were symbolic of resilience, immortality and elevation.

More yet: I learned that the direct mention of tools though relatively infrequent does include: sickles, blades and winnowing forks; flint, plumb line and reed; saws, and awls and chisels; mallets and hammers and nails. Oh my!

But in and with all of this my favorite references were about foundations. Whether in passage or parable foundations speak to me as a default I return to without exception. Foundations are so powerfully symbolic and profoundly spiritual.

Once long ago a man had a dream in which he was building a house. The foundation had already been poured and he was ready to commence with what they call sticks and boards – the work of the lumber.

He began, first with the sill plate and then the floor joists. Next was the decking as sheets of plywood were laid out. But he began to sense something wasn't right. So he stopped to check and, sure as day, he discovered the floor wasn't level.

Puzzled at this he shimmed up a few pieces of planking and got back to building. But before long, for a second time, it occurred that something was still wrong. This time he found everything to be out of square.

Determined to solve the problem he went to the basement where he met Someone who can best be described as the Architect. The Architect listened as the man vented out his troubles and then gestured toward the corner of the basement.

It was apparent that something was wacky with the foundation. The Architect said “You can go no further until you fix that.” With that, the man woke from his dream aware that he had just learned something incredibly essential about his life.

Hold that truth in your left hand now and consider a metaphor of Jesus in your right. It comes in the form of a parable. And let me tell you in slightly different words than we just heard by turning us to the translation known as the Message.

Jesus said, “If you work my teachings into your life you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded — but nothing moved that house because it was fixed to the rock.”

“But if you take my words casually and don’t work them into your life you are like a foolish carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up it collapsed like a house of cards.”

Interesting: Matthew placed this parable as the last of nineteen lessons in the Sermon on the Mount which virtually all scholars hold as the core ethical teachings of Jesus.¹ As if to offer a summary, “One more thing. Pay careful heed to what lies beneath.”

And of course, Paul, later in the Pastoral Epistles, makes the lesson more vivid still. He brings the image to a new and deeper place – the foundation not only being the rock-solid core of Jesus’ teaching but the very strength and being of Jesus himself.

“Like a skilled master-builder, I laid a foundation that another is building on. Let each one takes care how he builds. For no foundation can anyone lay that that which is laid in Jesus Christ.”

So listen now to the drift of a poem, which is really a prayer. It comes from a man named Barrie Shepherd who has been a kind of spiritual companion to my own journey over the years.

He places this whole matter of attentiveness to building and foundations right into our laps. These are his words:²

“We often call you ‘carpenter,’ Lord Jesus,
but forget what that title means.
You must have fashioned mangers and cradles,
tables and beds and doors – the stuff of many parables.
You knew exactly how to build a house
and brace it to endure the storms and blasts.

I knew an island house in Maine -
squatter-built just at the edge of the beach.
It stood until the winter before last,

when a storm blew out of the northeast as had not been seen
and the place was left an empty tilting shell upon the shore.

But then over the season I watched
an island carpenter rebuild that shattered cottage.
He must have read your parable before he did
because he set concrete footings down onto rock,
and before long the place was restored.
This time but it stood much stronger, firmer to the wind and waves.

My life could use that skill and craft, Dear Lord Carpenter,
so help me sink foundations that will not shake,
foundations resting on the rock of ages,
the resurrection solid beneath me.
Be my master-builder, Lord Jesus, and make strong my life,
my faith, my heart, my soul - this day and everyday."

Back to the fun with which I began. Who here knows what a cubit actually is? I ask not as a final exam - just some frolic to earn another gold star that you can turn in to St. Peter at Heaven's Gate!

A cubit is presented in Genesis as measure reliable enough to use as a standard for building, but is really metrically quite imprecise. It's the length of the human arm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger - generally taken as 457 mm, or 18 inches.

In some ancient cultures, - because the length of an arm is not a fixed constant, it was larger - as long as 531 mm, or 21 inches. It was considered the equivalent of 6 palms or two spans. Right, you understand! Try to build a house with variances as wide as that!

So I did some calculations, because many of you have asked, "How large is the house you are building?" Simple to tell: 924 square cubits (I think). I'll check that math with Noah before I put it in the contract with our builder!

Ah, Dear Lord Carpenter, we are so grateful for your lessons of life. Today. And all of our days. Amen.

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First Church
12 South Main Street
West Hartford, CT 06107

¹ Douglas A.R. Hare. Matthew: Interpretation - A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 85-86.

² J. Barrie Shepherd. A Diary of Prayer: Daily Meditations on the Parables of Jesus. Westminster Press, 1981, pp. 77-79.