

Salem at 165: A Celebration of Grace

Listen, beloved, and you will hear
Salem's story from its first year
 till now, year one hundred sixty-five,
 and how the church continues to thrive,
all by grace in this time and sphere.

With immigrants our story began
crossing the sea from German lands,
 fleeing hardship and hunger, revolution and strife,
 to find in this new land new hope, new life,
new obstacles, too, to withstand.

They built a fieldstone church on a country lane,
a home midst their homes to worship again,
 where they'd pray and sing when the bell was rung
 in liturgy accustomed to their ear and tongue,
giving thanks in familiar refrain.

To the church they streamed on the Sabbath day,
by horse or carriage, or walking their way.
 "Ein feste Berg" were the words they sang
 when the organ pipes from the balcony rang,
and "Unser Vater" were the words they prayed.

All 'round the church God's Acre lay,
waiting generations passing away.
 For children a schoolhouse was built on the lot;
 in German and English the lessons were taught.
Both in life and death, church held sway.

At the close of the first half century's duration,
still faithful to their baptismal vocation,
 they dared together a courageous decision;
 for the gospel they embraced a stirring vision,
mindful too of the next generation.

It must be counted Salem's boldest feat
that they left country lane to build on main street,
 leaving German behind for a wider grace,
 here poised the community to embrace,
the metamorphosis to native complete.

In the heart of the village they laid the foundation;

in 1903 held the dedication,
a magnificent building of cut granite stone
with a spacious nave like they'd never known,
and their dream began its realization.

The parish flourished in this visible place,
and soon they adorned their cherished space
with a pipe organ, mosaic tiles, marble and brass,
a masterful painting and brilliant stained glass,
a sanctuary of uncommon grace.

Parish life abounded with new ministries,
new organizations and numerous activities:
Men's Brotherhood, church picnics out on the bay,
a Sunday School orchestra and the Ladies' Aid.
They soon needed to expand the facilities.

They dug out a basement, added a stage to the hall.
By mid-century the classrooms had grown too small.
In '54 they erected a Sunday school wing
with a hall for church suppers and gatherings,
later a parking lot, even then always full.

Conflict in the city 'tween races and generations
affected the church as well as the nation--
civil rights, blockbusting, anti-war protests,
war on poverty, many people distressed,
Salem suffering the reverberations.

Community service became the central vision
launching these and more with faithful ambition:
a pre-school for children, for seniors, Lunch Plus,
rotating folk liturgies for worship use,
but not without stress and division.

Affirmation and healing were God's work to be done,
while building on all the outreach begun:
food pantry and refugee sponsorships,
global work and urban church partnerships,
through service making Christ known.

Through the years of the last quarter century,
for many of us vivid, living memory,
an increased staff brought innovations.
We undertook a major renovation,
prizing still healthy harmony.

In '49 we'll be two hundred years old.
What will these coming several decades hold?
 When they gather for that anniversary,
 what will they say of the likes of you and me?
Will they say we were faithful and bold?

Let's hope that for all that we hold dear,
for all those things that we cherish here--
 the altar and painting, the tiles and stained glass,
 the strains of the organ, the marble and brass,
liturgies, plays, our groups and dinners--

Let's pray that for the gospel we could set it all aside,
like our forebears long ago, whatever betide,
 give up our surroundings, the beautiful art,
 verbage and hymnals and make a new start--
if love, faith and hope would abide.

It's God's story through the years that we trace.
We're a royal priesthood, God's chosen race,
and the needs of the world wear God's own face.
A church of *living* stones is the *real* place;
 Salem means the people in whom God dwells.
 It is, above all, God's tale we tell.
 All shall be well, and all things shall be well,
 yes, all manner of things shall be well.
For we've been given grace upon grace.
We celebrate grace upon grace.

G. Edward Whetstone