

Sing to the Lord a new song

As we celebrate the 150th anniversary of our church with a service today, gratitude to God is at the center. This gratitude is accompanied by astonishment because 150 years is a very long time. Of course, some churches are older and have a much longer history, but this does not detract from gratitude and astonishment, the two keywords of this service.

We express gratitude and trust through this service today, through our prayers and the songs with which we praise God. It is gratitude for God's work here in Kobe since the founding of our church and for his guidance in the present time.

Sixty years ago, our church celebrated its ninetieth anniversary. On this occasion, the pastor divided these ninety years into five periods. The years of birth from 1868 to 1871, the years of getting organized and growth from 1872 to 1903 followed by the years of trials of growth and the years of war from 1904 to 1942. This period also included the building of the new church in Ikuta-cho and the move in 1929. It was followed by the trial by fire in the years from 1942 to 1956. The last period from 1956 to 1961 had the title 'The Church in the Challenging World of Today'. The closing was a historical reading entitled: The Church of Tomorrow: Need for Perpetual Rededication. Because our predecessors met these challenges and there were always people who were ready to commit themselves to this church, we can now look back on another sixty years of history. We also are part of this history for 10, 20, 30 years, or even longer. Now, this periodization is not to be questioned or continued here. I take up the second keyword and reflect on it. The second keyword was astonishment.

Nobody can imagine what life was like here in Kobe 150 years ago. Pictures of this time show a small town with a harbor and the life in that town. There are also photographs of the first church in the Kobe Foreign Settlement. With modern technology, some of these old photographs have been colorized. Nevertheless, it remains a different world. We know little about the fears and hopes of the people who gathered here in Kobe to trade or open a business. However, we know that 150 years ago foreigners of different nations decided to worship here together and build a church. They decided to do this for themselves, and they wanted to become witnesses to God and His guidance in this foreign land. Here in Kobe, they started to sing God a new song and proclaimed his salvation day after day.

Today we can only marvel at this because they could have spent their time differently. Amid their busy daily lives, they found time to thank the One to whom we all owe our lives. Perhaps it would be better to say that they took the time to thank God and listen to His Word. Of course, the missionaries sent out by American churches, namely Daniel C. Greene, played a significant role in the founding of the church.

We are amazed at this because their commitment was not only limited to attending church services on Sunday. Many supported the pastors and the board of directors. For most of them, it was a matter of course to work for the church. Without them, an active parish life would not have been possible.

We marvel at this because today only a few expatriates find their way to the church. It is no longer self-evident to go to church on Sunday. Besides that, the church is far up the mountain. It takes time to go there. And there are also other things we can do on Sundays. Even 150 years ago, people were very different and had different interests. Not everyone liked everyone else. But they

were united before God in common praise. That includes the willingness to listen to God's word. I don't mean the sermon but the Bible, which wants to be listened to, understood and interpreted in the community which is provided by the church. That should continue, even if it is becoming increasingly difficult. It is easy today to join a community where only what one wants to hear is told.

"The Church in the Challenging World of Today" was intended to characterize the years 1956 to 1961, but it is still as relevant as ever. The challenges in 2021 are different. It is now our task to face them, not to stop at the amazement of our predecessors.

Three questions follow from the threefold astonishment, the astonishment that people took time to celebrate worship, the astonishment at their great commitment even in difficult times, and the astonishment at the community of people from different backgrounds and with diverse interests.

- What does worship mean to us? What does it mean to us to make time for it?
- How can we get involved, and what can we contribute to the community of this church?
- What does it mean to us to hear God's Word together with people we would not otherwise meet in our daily lives?

Everyone will answer these questions differently, but at the center of all is God, who has called us here to sing a new song to Him, today, tomorrow, and in the future. If we do not forget this, we need not worry about the future of our churches. God has already guided and protected this church for 150 years and will continue to do so in the future.

Amen.

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