

**“...And the Journey Continues”**

Concluding Remarks for the Fortieth Anniversary Celebration

By Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

Stone Mountain, Georgia

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**I am grateful for all who have made this glorious celebration possible.** They have worked hard.

Planning for this celebration began two years ago under the superb leadership of Arlene Kirkland, Kathy Goodenow and Linda Cummings. They have done such an outstanding job that we have authorized them to begin working on the fiftieth! Their first meeting will be tonight at 6:00 in Linda's office.

**I am grateful for all who have made this church what it is, and it is one of the finest churches in all of Georgia.** This did not happen without a lot of hard work, too, along with a keen vision and an immeasurable amount of spiritual depth and maturity.

When I became your pastor ten years ago, I realized very quickly that this church was built upon relationships, which in my opinion, is most important for growing a healthy and vibrant church. Nothing is more important than people and their well being as Jesus taught and modeled this throughout his ministry.

I am grateful for pastors, staff and members, past and present, who have taught and modeled this at Smoke Rise for forty years. **We owe you a great debt of gratitude and I pledge to you that we will do our best to continue this rich tradition because I am convinced this community needs Smoke Rise Baptist Church.** Our church is a place of healing and hope for people who are hurting and there is no shortage of people who are in pain.

**I know no better place** for the wounded to find healing, the lonely to find companionship, the restless to find peace, the confused to find understanding, the overwhelmed to find courage, the inferior to find confidence, the discouraged to find encouragement, the lost to find direction and the forgotten to find affirmation.

**I know of no better place** for the grieving to find comfort, the weak to find strength, the hungry to find food, the excluded to find a warm embrace and the guilty to find forgiveness.

**I know of no better place** for the maligned to find respect, the outcast to find a warm hug, the silenced to find a voice, the powerless to find an advocate, the overlooked to find a place at the table, the downtrodden to find a helping hand, the dying to find eternal life and the serious student of faith to find kindred spirits on the same quest.

**What's more, it doesn't matter** if you are a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or you watch Fox News or CNN.

**It doesn't matter** if you prefer to sing choruses or hymns.

**It doesn't matter** if you cheer for the Atlanta Braves, or God forbid, the Yankees, the Mets or the Red Sox.

**It doesn't matter if** you are a Georgia Bulldog, a Georgia Tech Yellow Jacket, you shout "War Eagle or Roll Tide."

**It doesn't matter if** you are a Florida Gator, a Florida State Seminole, a South Carolina Gamecock, a Clemson Tiger, a Tennessee Volunteer, a Vanderbilt Commodore, a Duke Blue Devil, a North Carolina Tar Heel, a Notre Dame Fighting Irish or a proud, but far out numbered, Kentucky Wildcat, you are welcome in this place and will find friends that you will swear, that is if Baptists could swear, are a part of your family that you just never knew.

You may not support the same political candidates, consult the same news source, sing the same songs or root for the same team, but you will find that the person sitting next to you will be the first to your aid when you need him or her or the first you can work with to make our world better.

**This is who Smoke Rise is.** This is what makes it unique. This is our mission and purpose. This is who we have been called to be and what we have been charged to do by the one who said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" Luke 4:18-19.

May we go from this place today renewed, refreshed, recharged and dedicated anew to pursuing the vision that birthed this wonderful church forty years ago. Like Esther of old, "for such a time as this," we have been brought together to be the presence of Christ in a broken world and make hope visible.

We need no higher call. We need no loftier goal. We need no further challenge. We just need to join hearts and hands and sing together, "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us!"