

BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS, AND ACT

Remarks on the Occasion of My Inauguration
As the 25th President of Hampden-Sydney College

Larry Stimpert
April 28, 2017

He said to me, 'Your son Solomon is the one who shall build My house and My courts; for I have chosen him to be a son to Me, and I will be a father to him. I will establish his kingdom forever if he resolutely performs My commandments and My ordinances, as is done now.' So now, in the sight of all Israel, the assembly of the LORD, and in the hearing of our God, observe and seek after all the commandments of the LORD your God so that you may possess the good land and bequeath it to your sons after you forever.

"As for you, my son Solomon... Consider now, for the LORD has chosen you to build a house for the sanctuary; be courageous and act."

Then David gave to his son Solomon the plan of the porch of the temple, its buildings, its storehouses, its upper rooms, its inner rooms and the room for the mercy seat; and the plan of all that he had in mind, for the courts of the house of the LORD, and for all the surrounding rooms, for the storehouses of the house of God and for the storehouses of the dedicated things ...

Then David said to his son Solomon, "Be strong and courageous, and act; do not fear nor be dismayed, for the LORD God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you nor forsake you until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished. Now behold, there are the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God, and every willing man of any skill will be with you in all the work for all kinds of service."

Selections from I Chronicles 28

Today is a day of transition. The passage of scripture Ryan read is a story of transition. In this passage, David has been informed that he is to die soon and that he is being denied the opportunity to build the temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark of the Covenant. Instead, he is to commission his son Solomon to build the temple. Underscoring the importance of this work, he exhorts Solomon, not just once, but twice to "be courageous and act."

In asking Ryan to read this passage, I am not suggesting that I am Solomon. Lest you have any doubt, my family members and friends who have traveled to be with us today and who have known me far longer than anyone at Hampden-Sydney will be happy to tell you that I am no Solomon. Instead, I want to suggest that this passage offers an appropriate allegory for this great College at this particular moment in its history. Like David preparing to die and turning responsibility for the construction of the temple over to his son, Solomon, this College is at a moment of transition.

The importance of today is not that I am becoming the 25th president of Hampden-Sydney, but rather presidential inaugurations are important because they are an occasion for marking the

transition from what has been to what will be. In this allegory, David represents the 242 years of legacy that have been bequeathed to us. This legacy includes Samuel Stanhope Smith and his vision of a College for the sons of patriots. It includes our charter trustees, Patrick Henry and James Madison; it includes William Henry Harrison, Jonathan Cushing, Graves Thompson, Stokley Fulton, and countless others who left their mark on this great College. This legacy includes our Honor Code and Code of Conduct, a devoted faculty and staff, and a rigorous academic program. It includes our traditions of friendliness and hospitality, and rich culture of brotherhood. Our legacy also includes what must be the oldest and most distinctive mission statement of any college or university—“to form good men and good citizens.” This rich legacy—our inheritance—allows us to look forward to the future with optimism and high expectations.

If David in this scripture represents all that has gone before us, then Solomon and the temple represent all that we will become and how we will fulfill our mission “to form good men and good citizens” in the future. The scripture includes at least three important messages for us:

First, is the importance of plans: Just as the scripture describes the plans for the construction of the temple, we are now developing plans for enhancing every aspect of our students’ experiences. This planning is predicated on the belief that our College’s ability to thrive in the future depends on being able to boast that Hampden-Sydney offers young men an extraordinary coming-of-age experience that they cannot get anywhere else. Since our founding, we have been a college that emphasizes the development of all aspects of our young men’s lives, but especially their character. As a former president of Swarthmore once said, “It is not enough to develop intellect, for intellect by itself is essentially amoral, capable of evil as well as good. We must develop the character which makes intellect constructive, and the personality which makes it effective.” From the day this College opened its doors, it was not content to form smart men; it sought “to form good men and good citizens,” and this tradition continues today as our plans focus on developing men of character who will make meaningful contributions to the organizations where they work and the communities they call home. Our plans also seek to strengthen our bonds of brotherhood. In the Proverbs we read that as “iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” We, too, must commit to having every situation, every encounter, and every friendship here be an opportunity for refining and bringing-out the very best in every young man during his time here.

The second lesson of this passage of scripture is that the building of the temple is a collective effort. David does not tell Solomon to build the temple single-handedly. Instead, he says, “...behold, there are the divisions of the priests and the Levites for all the service of the house of God and every willing man of any skill will be with you ... for all kinds of service.” This College deserves outstanding leadership, and I pledge today to do my very best to provide you with that leadership, but one of the great ironies of leadership is that higher one goes in the organizational hierarchy the more one depends on the efforts of others to accomplish important goals. We all have key roles in fulfilling this College’s destiny. There are no indispensable people, but our collective effort is absolutely indispensable to this College’s success.

Finally, the passage of scripture emphasizes that facing the future requires courage. The *status quo* is a force to be reckoned with. And, the *status quo* is most powerful in exactly the context this College finds itself today—when everything is good enough. David was a great king, and Israel became a great kingdom during his reign. He could have said, “Solomon, you should just kick back and rest on my laurels, things are just fine, all you have to do is maintain.” But that’s not what he says at all.

Instead, David tells Solomon to “be courageous and act.” Later, to underscore the importance of the moment, he admonishes Solomon to “be strong and courageous, and act.”

With such an impressive past, it could be very easy for this College to fall victim to complacency, to believe that we have reached some sort of ideal state that should be enshrined. But, I have been telling this brotherhood and community even before I arrived on campus, that our most important work lies ahead. Our society now faces daunting challenges—complex, multifaceted problems that defy simple solutions. To address these challenges, we need “leaders of character who are well equipped and prepared to lead lives of consequence” in every field of endeavor.

Our essential work, work that we have done in the past, work we do today, but most certainly work we must continue doing in the future, is to prepare “good men and good citizens” to be these leaders. Our College’s most important days are not in the past, but they lie in the future. The last 242 years are a remarkable legacy, but they are only the preparation for the fulfillment of this College’s destiny. And, that destiny is limited only by our aspirations for it. Let us “be strong and courageous, and act” on those aspirations as we together chart an ambitious future for Hampden-Sydney College. Thank you for asking me to lead this effort as Hampden-Sydney College’s 25th president.