

# HAPPY 10<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY OAK HILLS

*Our God Does Not Change*

TEXT: ZEPHANIAH 3:17 (ESV)



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January 4, 2009

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Overland Park,  
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## Oak Hills' Theme Verse

Today we celebrate a milestone in the life of this church—Oak Hill's turns ten years old. As I was thinking about what text I'd use for this birthday message, I chose Zephaniah 3:17 for a couple of reasons. One, if this church has a theme verse, this is it. Scott Sauls, Oak Hills' planting pastor, must have quoted this verse almost every Sunday in our early years—and for good reason. It is one of the most breathtaking statements of God's affection for His people in the whole of Scripture. My second reason is to see how it is holding up as Oak Hills' theme verse.

## Zephaniah 3:17

*<sup>17</sup>The LORD your God is in your midst,  
a mighty one who will save;  
he will rejoice over you with gladness;  
he will quiet you by his love;  
he will exult over you with loud singing.*

## Warrior, Father and Super Snuggler

The reason many are so drawn to this verse is because of the incredible words of affection we see here. God is presented as a father with His people like a child in His arms as He dotes, singing lullabies over us and power ballads about us. One of the things I love about it is the juxtaposition we see between this affectionate papa and the mighty warrior of renown. God is the mighty One who will save. It's like finding out the greatest superhero who ever lived, one with no weakness, is your dad. Which trait are you most drawn to—father or warrior?

If I were to take a poll in my house over which quality of the Lord my kids were most interested in, we'd be split. My son and oldest daughter would go with "Warrior"—Chris because he's almost nine and Maggie because she thinks Darth Vader is cute. Kate and Jane, however, would go with "father" and I have this on good authority. We have a Sunday afternoon ritual in our home which involves me taking a nap with my "Sunday Super Snuggler." I'll ask the night before, "Who wants to be my super snuggler tomorrow?" Kate will raise her hand high. Jane will look at Kate and raise hers too. Maggie will say, "Kate does." Chris will be off someplace dismembering his lego guys.

But you know what? Chris used to be my Sunday Super Snuggler, and there was a time more recently where you couldn't have kept Maggie from that appointment if you wanted. She was all in. But these two would rather be awake than asleep on Sunday afternoon. And, I fear, they'd rather *not* snuggle than snuggle. I was the same way, and so were you, probably.

When you read a text like Zephaniah, which trait are you most drawn to? Is your answer different from what it was ten years ago? When I first heard the scriptures that spoke of God as affectionate, it was a side of Him I'd never imagined. It filled me with wonder and warmth and a hunger to know Him like that—to call him Daddy when I prayed, to refer to myself as His little boy. Am I different now? I must admit I am. Is this a good thing? In some ways, maybe not. But in other ways, I am convinced it is crucial for my growth in Him. Do you ever feel guilty when you realize you are not the same as you used to be? What are we to make of this? Let's look at our own changes.

## What Defines Oak Hills?

In your bulletins I've included a couple reproductions of some old Oak Hills newsletters, one from around the time I was brought on in 2003, and another from several years earlier, right around the time Oak Hills formed. Here is a small excerpt of our story as told by Scott Sauls from that 1998 newsletter:

*I remember just over a year ago going for a ride in the car with my wife Patti, and we were contemplating what we and six other adults, along with our children, were about to do. Somehow we had become convinced that it would be a good thing to start a new church for Lee's Summit and its surrounding communities. During our drive, a very significant question arose. "How in the world are we going to pull this off? Is this a realistic aim for such a small group of people?"*

*We've seen God do marvelous things. On March 15, 1998 we began praying, canvassing the community, and meeting as many people as we could. Within a couple of months we had barely enough people to put together a monthly "come and see" worship service for the community (we even had to borrow helpers from our mother church in Shawnee). For about five months, we met for Sunday night worship in our living room, and committed ourselves to pray fervently for God to build His church through our fledgling group of families.*

*Gradually, along came several key people that we had prayed for, most notably an extremely talented group of Christian musicians, including five people with music degrees, a gifted pianist, two guitarists and a music director with the heart and the skill to create an atmosphere of majestic, God-centered worship. In addition, God brought along a number of other key individuals and families eager to be part of the adventure of starting a new movement for Christ in our community.*

*On Nov 8, 1998, Oak Hills officially went public with her "Grand Opening" worship service at the Pleasant Lea Junior High in Lee's Summit. Since then we've had about 175 different people come through our door, many of whom have heard the good news of Christ for the first time, and many of whom have decided to make Oak Hills their church home.*

When I read these words, it stirs my soul to look at what Oak Hills has become in ten years. Like any church, we have stories to tell. Since Scott wrote these words, we've relocated a few times, eventually finding some stability here at Aquinas. We've had over 1,000 people join us for worship in that time—with maybe eighty of them on account of their being born.

There is a big part of me that wants to show you the old newsletters so we can bask together in the faithfulness we've seen in God's leading, building and preserving this church. Especially for those of you who have been here longer than I. But I must confess that showing you these old newsletters has also been something of an experiment in self-consciousness. The first thing to jump off the page at me is that while we look very similar in many ways to the original dream, there are just as many areas where we have gone in different directions.

I wonder to myself, "Is this okay?" We don't look like we used to. The image at the top of this page is the charter letter Oak Hills signed requesting that Presbytery grant us status as a particular church. Not one person who signed it ten years ago is still here. Is that okay? Scott and I are pretty different from each other. Is that okay? We're nowhere closer to that ten acre plot of land than we were ten years ago. Is that okay?

What should mark Oak Hills? What should be the constant when everything changes? Should we try to be the church that doesn't use three point sermons, that doesn't do programs, that doesn't make you dress up? When I came to Oak Hills, there was a strong emphasis on the fact that we were a church for the broken and hurting. And I loved that. I still love it. And I still see that we are. But let me ask something: is this the constant we should guard at all costs? What if the Lord sends an infusion of people who are more or less doing fine? What about exceedingly happy people? Is a church defined by being for the broken prepared to love the genuinely happy?

What should be the constant that defines Oak Hills? Our union with Christ—the fact that we, as a local church, are His Body and He is our Head. If there is any external characteristic, no matter how noble it appears, that we look to for our identity as a church, it is an idol—abundant brokenness notwithstanding. Our boast should not be, "Come to Oak Hills. We're a mess." It should be, "Come to Oak Hills. We are Christ's." We are not here to stand and face our community in the hopes that they might be impressed by what they see. We are here to stand before our God and humbly submit to whatever He might have for us according to His perfect will as we delight in Him.

## Our God Does Not Change

Am I saying we should seek something other than being a place for the hurting and broken. Absolutely not. I'm saying we need to be wise enough to know what sometimes we read Zephaniah 3:17 and what we want most is the doting Father, and other times we want the rescuing Warrior. But this isn't because God is changing. We are. Our God doesn't change. Not only that, He doesn't only wear one character trait at a time.

Tim Keller, of Redeemer Church in New York, once preached a pair of sermons from back to back texts in John 2—verses 1-12 where Jesus, at a wedding in Cana, miraculously transformed water into wine—and not just any wine, but exceedingly good wine, saving the party; and then verses 13-22 where Jesus goes into the temple and makes a whip of cords and drives out the animals and money changers, overturning their tables, incensed that they would abuse such a holy place. Keller called this series "The Lord of the Wine, The Lord of the Whip," saying you can't have one without the other and still have Jesus. He is the benefactor of the best creation has to offer, but He never stops being the same one Who is jealous for His Father's glory and indignant when the temple is turned into a marketplace.

The God we worship is the mightiest warrior ever while being at the same time the most affection and doting Father. He is all-knowing and long-suffering, unchanging and transcendent, incomprehensible and knowable, self-existent and relational. In and of Himself, apart from any external relationship, He is all-knowing, <sup>(Ps 139:1-6)</sup> all powerful, <sup>(Gen 18:14)</sup> omnipresent, <sup>(Pr 15:3)</sup> eternal, <sup>(Isa 57:15)</sup> unchanging, <sup>(Mal 3:6)</sup> beyond our understanding, <sup>(Rom 11:33)</sup> self-existent <sup>(Ex 3:14)</sup> and self-sufficient. <sup>(Ps 50:12)</sup> As He relates to His creation, He is morally perfect, <sup>(Job 34:10)</sup> always right, <sup>(Ps 119:142)</sup> truthful, <sup>(Ps 31:5)</sup> faithful, <sup>(Dt 7:9)</sup> loving, <sup>(Jer 31:3)</sup> wise, <sup>(Isa 40:28)</sup> just, <sup>(Ps 89:14)</sup> merciful, <sup>(Ps 106:44-45)</sup> good, <sup>(2 Chr 5:13)</sup> and jealous for His own glory. <sup>(Ex 34:14)</sup> And as we see in Zephaniah, while His affections are tender, He carries the power and skill of warrior.

There will be times in your life when what you need from God is tender mercy. And He can deliver that better than anyone else. But like Lewis's Aslan, this doesn't make Him tame. For every whisper, there is a roar. There will be times when you feel you need Him to vindicate you in the presence of your accusers, and if you are innocent of the charges against you, He will defend you. But this doesn't mean He won't at the same time convict you deeply of the transgressions for which you are guilty. There may be times when what you think you need is for everything to calm down, but like the disciples in the boat in Galilee's storm, you need to know that sometimes when He stills the storms around you, He stirs a storm inside you.

I don't know everything the Lord has for this church ten years from now. I have hopes, dreams, wants and fears, as I'm sure you do. But here's what I do know. God knows what He has for us in the years to come. And while the setting, look, procedures, names and faces may change, He will not. He is mighty to save, and there will no doubt be times when we will know that need for rescue more than we know anything else. As our Father, He is glad to have us, such that it stirs in Him a joyful song He sings over us like we sing over our own kids.

Oak Hills, happy 10<sup>th</sup> birthday. I have good news. The God who loves us and keeps us is both a mighty warrior and an affectionate father. Though there will be times you'll prefer one over the other, you will never have to choose one over the other. The Warrior who rescues your soul from Hell is your Father, who happens to be the mightiest warrior ever. The Lord our God is here in our midst. He is mighty to save. He will rejoice over you with gladness. He will quite you with His love. He will exalt over you with singing. And He will not change. Still, may he change us ever more into the Church He means for us to become by His grace and for His glory, and may we not be afraid, but rather want everything He is and has to give.

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