



ENTERING the LAND

by Rev. Alan Hawkins

I will never get tired of reflecting on the story of how Church of the Redeemer came to be at New Garden Park. Ten years ago, we began talking about this multi-faceted vision (Parish/Park/Farm/Center, as it was at the time) that we believed God was calling us to. We had no idea in those early days what a winding road it would be, traveling towards the realization of that vision. There were many twists and turns, unpaved patches that made our teeth rattle, and ditches to fall into. The many disappointments and confusions we experienced over the years of watching and waiting made many of us wonder if this grand dream would ever be realized.

Waiting on God's promises should be a familiar practice to those who follow him. In Genesis, God's people are given a vision of a Promised Land, but they do not enter it for hundreds and hundreds of years. Generations pass as his people watch and wait, the metaphorical "road" they travel always seeming to veer away from their destination as soon as they get close. Certainly they experience disappointment and confusion and doubt in God's promises. But the story of God's people is that they have a promise-keeping God who proves himself faithful over and over again.

After the Israelites' years of waiting and wandering towards this promise, they finally find themselves standing on the cusp of taking hold of that long-awaited promise. In Joshua 3:5, we find Joshua commissioning them before they enter the Promised Land. "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you."

What does it mean to be consecrated? In the fall of 2017, Bishop Steve Breedlove consecrated the building and land at New Garden Park, setting it aside as a place for the work of God through his people. To consecrate ourselves means to recognize that we have a spot in God's redemptive purposes in our community and the world. It is to reorient our hearts and minds towards his purposes rather than our own agendas for our lives. To be consecrated also means to prepare yourself for the ways that God will involve you in this work.

As God's people took time to consecrate themselves before entering the Promised Land, they had the opportunity to reflect on what he had already done for them on the journey towards this moment; before stepping into the next thing, it was a chance to recognize and offer thanksgiving for God's work in and through them during the time of waiting.

With God, waiting is a purposeful work of trusting, remembering his faithfulness, and recognizing his work within and around you in all times and seasons of life. Perhaps it feels like the year 2020 has been filled with a great deal of idle waiting. As a world community, we have felt frustrated, frightened, disappointed, and despairing when our plans have been thwarted time and again by the realities around us. But our God is a promise-keeping God, and the challenges and obstacles we face as we wait on his promises are purposeful in their own right. Any waiting we do on the Lord is never idle because God himself is not idle in our season of waiting. He is always at work.

This is why I love to remember the story of how we came to New Garden Park: it is an example of God at work for our good even when we don't understand what he's doing. In January 2016, I was sitting in the president's office at Greensboro College (GC) watching our best-laid plans come to nothing. We had been planning to move our church downtown to GC's campus to start building our vision. I was devastated when this plan did not come to fruition. I was so confused; after all that work, why would everything have unraveled so that we find ourselves stuck in the same place we'd been waiting for years? I also wondered: would I personally lose credibility with Church of the Redeemer? Would folks lose trust in me and my leadership through these events?

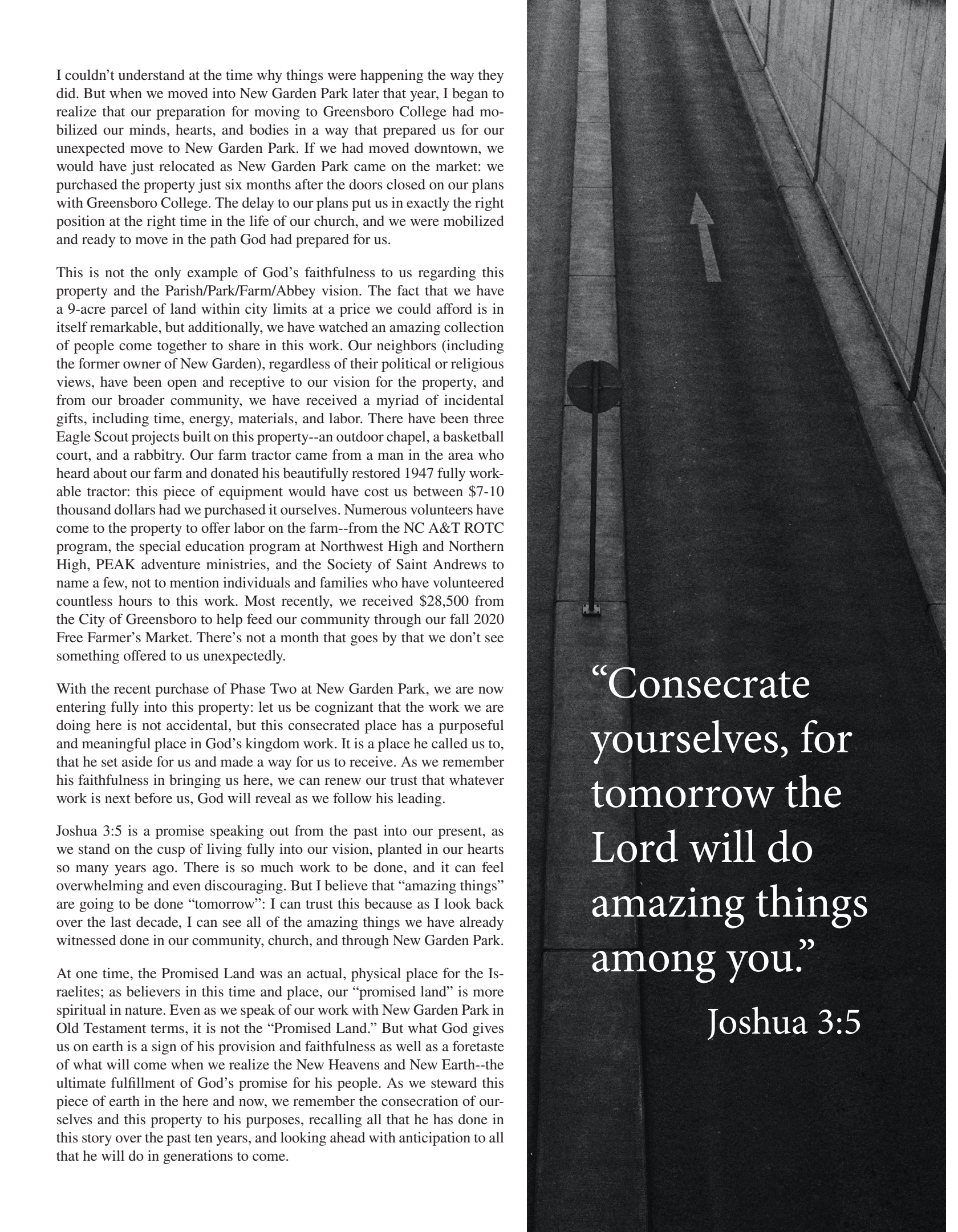
I couldn't understand at the time why things were happening the way they did. But when we moved into New Garden Park later that year, I began to realize that our preparation for moving to Greensboro College had mobilized our minds, hearts, and bodies in a way that prepared us for our unexpected move to New Garden Park. If we had moved downtown, we would have just relocated as New Garden Park came on the market: we purchased the property just six months after the doors closed on our plans with Greensboro College. The delay to our plans put us in exactly the right position at the right time in the life of our church, and we were mobilized and ready to move in the path God had prepared for us.

This is not the only example of God's faithfulness to us regarding this property and the Parish/Park/Farm/Abbey vision. The fact that we have a 9-acre parcel of land within city limits at a price we could afford is in itself remarkable, but additionally, we have watched an amazing collection of people come together to share in this work. Our neighbors (including the former owner of New Garden), regardless of their political or religious views, have been open and receptive to our vision for the property, and from our broader community, we have received a myriad of incidental gifts, including time, energy, materials, and labor. There have been three Eagle Scout projects built on this property--an outdoor chapel, a basketball court, and a rabbitry. Our farm tractor came from a man in the area who heard about our farm and donated his beautifully restored 1947 fully workable tractor: this piece of equipment would have cost us between \$7-10 thousand dollars had we purchased it ourselves. Numerous volunteers have come to the property to offer labor on the farm--from the NC A&T ROTC program, the special education program at Northwest High and Northern High, PEAK adventure ministries, and the Society of Saint Andrews to name a few, not to mention individuals and families who have volunteered countless hours to this work. Most recently, we received \$28,500 from the City of Greensboro to help feed our community through our fall 2020 Free Farmer's Market. There's not a month that goes by that we don't see something offered to us unexpectedly.

With the recent purchase of Phase Two at New Garden Park, we are now entering fully into this property: let us be cognizant that the work we are doing here is not accidental, but this consecrated place has a purposeful and meaningful place in God's kingdom work. It is a place he called us to, that he set aside for us and made a way for us to receive. As we remember his faithfulness in bringing us here, we can renew our trust that whatever work is next before us, God will reveal as we follow his leading.

Joshua 3:5 is a promise speaking out from the past into our present, as we stand on the cusp of living fully into our vision, planted in our hearts so many years ago. There is so much work to be done, and it can feel overwhelming and even discouraging. But I believe that "amazing things" are going to be done "tomorrow": I can trust this because as I look back over the last decade, I can see all of the amazing things we have already witnessed done in our community, church, and through New Garden Park.

At one time, the Promised Land was an actual, physical place for the Israelites; as believers in this time and place, our "promised land" is more spiritual in nature. Even as we speak of our work with New Garden Park in Old Testament terms, it is not the "Promised Land." But what God gives us on earth is a sign of his provision and faithfulness as well as a foretaste of what will come when we realize the New Heavens and New Earth--the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise for his people. As we steward this piece of earth in the here and now, we remember the consecration of ourselves and this property to his purposes, recalling all that he has done in this story over the past ten years, and looking ahead with anticipation to all that he will do in generations to come.



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Joshua 3:5