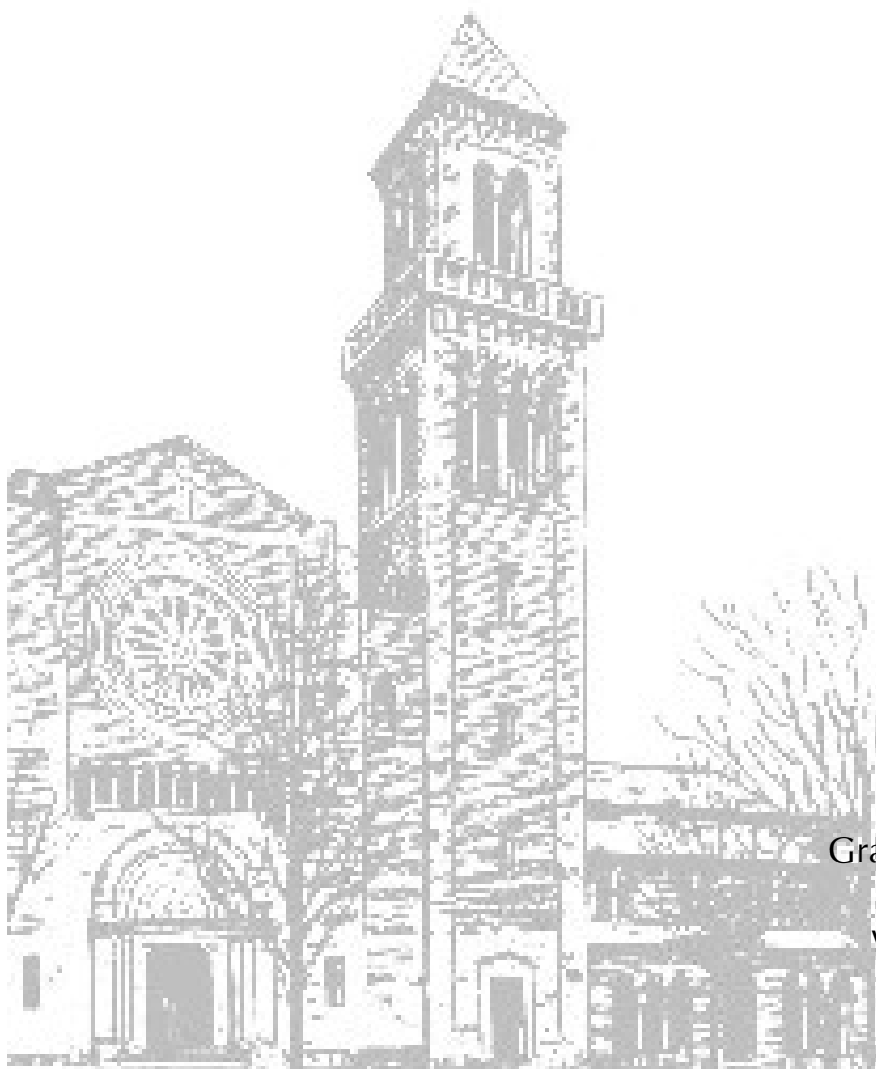


“Streams That Meet and Merge”

Sunday, November 19, 2006

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Streams That Meet and Merge”

READINGS

Genesis 12

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing...So Abram went, as the LORD had told him... Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered... and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

Kid Material

Niklas' short story. "I had to change schools this year and I had to meet a lot of new people. I expected to be with my friends, but I wasn't. The first two weeks were quite miserable. Things got better, and I made new friends. The moral of this was patience, flexibility and friendship."

Pat - "I started homeschooling over a year ago so I wouldn't have to deal with teachers and schools disregarding the interests and abilities of students. It has been very good because I am learning more, having fun while I'm learning and I have more free time. This was a big improvement and I am happier."

Hebrews 11

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise... By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'

* * * * *

SERMON

It's Thanksgiving time which, as we all know, leads to thoughts of parades and football and turkey and stuffing, fond memories of holidays past with their thoughts of gratitude and somewhere in the midst, pilgrims.

This morning I want to talk about pilgrims – not the stereotypical folks with tall hats and buckles and blunderbusses, but the concept. Pilgrim simply means someone

from elsewhere, traveler. The Plymouth colony was certainly from elsewhere, arduously so. And they made that hard journey to live by the faith they professed. They took the word pilgrim onto themselves consciously to evoke a passage from the Christian letter called Hebrews - "They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth... that they are seeking a homeland...[that] they desire a better country." The writer of this epistle takes up this theme from the story of Abraham and Sarah, the original pilgrims in a sense. "Now the Lord said to Abram (as he was then called) 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.' "

This story, being studied in our Character School as you heard earlier, is the touchstone of western religious life and yes, that includes Fountain Street Church. Every Jew and Christian, every skeptic and seeker, shares this story because we are all pilgrims.

Fast forward to 1856, to downtown Grand Rapids, about three blocks from here, on a cold February day as a group of men are traveling along Division street hauling a pulpit, a bible, a bookcase and other assorted furnishings through the doubtless snowy unpaved streets. They are traveling from one Baptist church to another. Earnest and stern-faced, they have won a fight between contesting factions in the once united church. The First Baptist Church has legal right to the stuff that the Tabernacle Baptist church claimed, both being factions of an earlier church that had split.

When they were one church, they met for a while in the courthouse in Fulton Park a block east of here where the veterans' memorial now stands. But they soon left, feeling it unwise to use public facilities for worship. In those days Baptist bedrock was the separation of church and state and even the appearance of friendliness was troubling. How times have changed.

They ultimately get together for good in 1869 and built a church here on this spot. What is worth noting is the problem that divided them – church discipline – was ultimately insoluble. Eager to be pure and holy like those Plymouth pilgrims, they assiduously sought to ensure hypocrites and sinners would not corrupt the righteous. In this they were very like many Protestants at the time. But try as they might they could find no sure way to keep sin and error out. Neither could the Plymouth pilgrims, by the way. Nor could Calvin's Geneva, the Roman Church, the monasteries with their monks and nuns or the early church with its many bitter fights over doctrine. A biography of Augustine I am reading reminds me of the ancient Donatist controversy, which could have been the First Baptist Church of Grand Rapids in its devotion to purifying and protecting the faith.

Thanksgiving time, holiday time in general, invites nostalgia and so it seemed to me a good time to reflect back on our past as a church. This week and next I shall hold up our past as an inspiration and lesson for now. I shared but one moment, a hundred and fifty years ago, when it was wild and woolly, and also sad and also silly. It was, in short, a story like Abraham and Sarah or the Plymouth colony in Massachusetts. We may read them with admiration now, but we forget it was much messier than the story says. They were mere human beings like us, trudging their way through life. No script in hand, no director calling the shots, they set out through life

with a wild hope that something better lay ahead.

And we are part of that history – direct spiritual descendents of Abraham and Sarah and those Plymouth pilgrims who left their familiar homes and went in search of a better country. Full of missteps and mistakes because we are merely human, we can nonetheless look back through time and see a line, a path that leads from Ur of the Chaldees all the way to the banks of the Grand River.

And we do this because we believe all pilgrimages lead to the same place, just as all rivers go to the sea. Whether we walk to the Ganges at Varanasi, tread our way to the cathedral of Compostela, make the Hajj to Mecca, or merely come to church on the corner of Fountain and Bostwick, we are all pilgrims seeking a better country. It's not a place on a map, but a place in the heart.

Fountain Street Church is a pilgrim church, where the many streams of our individual lives meet and merge. Where once we quarreled over holiness and purity of faith now we struggle to find unity and diversity. Where once we fought over pulpits and bibles, now we seek to find our calling and voice for a new century. That was then, this is now. The river flows on. We bring our personal stories and add them to those already written and those still being lived. We join the river which flows from the past and moves steadily into the future, on its way to the sea, to the place where we hope and believe all will be well.

But it is not ours to go to the sea. Our task is to be the river, to take the pilgrim staff from those who went before, propel life onward as long as we live, so that even when we are done others will carry on. In a few moments we shall hold our annual meeting. Prosaic and dull it may be, but this is one more step on the pilgrim path. And when we are done, we shall eat our pilgrim feast (the first thanksgiving was a potluck supper, you know) and while there, remembering fondly, you will see a time line of our church history on the wall. Go and look, learn. But most important, put yourself in it. Add your history to the history of the church. Join the river, let your stream meet and merge. And have faith that though you be as good as dead, our descendants will be 'as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.'