

Sunday, November 20, 2011
Orinda Community Church UCC
A Sermon by the Rev. Frank Baldwin

O BEAUTIFUL FOR PILGRIM FEET

Hebrews 11:8-10

I. Like a wise old grandmother telling family stories to her grandchildren, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews reaches back in time and memory to illustrate the sustaining power of faith from the lives of Abraham and Sarah and their offspring. The brief excerpt we have just heard recalls events from the 12th chapter of Genesis that might have occurred sometime in the 19th century B.C., where Abraham and Sarah, both in their mid-70s, are suddenly called by God to begin an epic journey, moving from their life as wanderers in the northern regions of Syria toward a settled home in the land of Canaan.

This will be a move of more than geographical significance. Abraham and Sarah and their family are beginning the long pilgrim trek from nomadic obscurity towards the status of a landed people alongside the other “peoples” of the world. God promises them a country of their own, and as many descendants as there are stars in the sky and grains of sand on the shore, although they themselves will not live to see the promise fulfilled except through the eyes of faith. We are just at that misty point where sacred myth and world history begin to merge with the appearance of identifiable “historical” persons, dates and places. Here is the birth of a new people, strangely chosen to embody the purposes of God among the nations of the earth.

But let us acknowledge that God’s magnificent promise comes to Abraham and Sarah with both good news and bad news. The good news is that they are given the land of Canaan. The bad news is that it will be another thousand years before the Canaanites are through with it. Abraham and Sarah find that their promised land is full of entrenched indigenous tribes, cultures and religions. Maybe it is destined to be their land eventually, but for the time being they are immigrants and outsiders, uninvited (and often unwelcomed) guests.

The old couple and their extended family learn to be very careful, given the explicitness of their call and their singular hope in the promise that God has revealed to them. They realize that their faith – indeed their very existence – puts them in conflict with the world around them. The Canaanites will condemn them to death as spies if they but guess the full significance of Abraham and Sarah’s presence in their country. Without wavering in their trust that God’s peculiar promise will one day be accomplished, the little family of Hebrew immigrants finds ways to live discreetly among their new neighbors. As Saint Paul might have observed, they lived “in the world but not of it.” We are told they lived “in tents... as in a foreign land.” That symbol of the tent is one well chosen for Abraham and Sarah and their progeny down through the ages. A tent has always been the temporary home of refugees and immigrants, exiles and sojourners, backpackers in the field and soldiers on the march, pilgrims, wanderers, shepherds, outcasts, nomads, and now, as we have seen, even the protesting “Occupiers” of Wall Street and so many other places.

This ancestral experience of being tent-dwellers – “aliens in a foreign land” – was clearly not lost upon the early Christians, the people who wrote the biblical Letter to the Hebrews in the 1st century A.D. The God of Jesus Christ had called them, like Abraham and Sarah of old – to again take on the role of pilgrims and strangers in the world for the sake of a divine promise. The Letter is one of encouragement and strengthening for a people who were experiencing the challenging uniqueness of their faith in the gospel of God’s redeeming grace, justice and love. Their joyous, peaceful and inclusive lifestyle was beginning to stand out within the violent, oppressive, materialistic culture of the burgeoning Roman Empire; moreover, they could see that for them there was now no turning back to the rigid, controlling, formalities of the Jewish temple-religion out of which the Christian faith was rapidly emerging. For the time being, they will have no familiar cultural or spiritual home in the world; but the Letter seeks to comfort them with the example of Abraham and Sarah, and with the empowering reminder that as followers of Jesus they are pilgrims looking for “the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14), where God is bringing a new and better world into being through their faith.

II. The 17th century American Pilgrims of Massachusetts Bay – spiritual ancestors of ours in the United Church of Christ and inventors of the Thanksgiving tradition that most of us will observe again in this week to come – quite literally left the known world behind to seek a toehold for religious liberty in a new land of promise. Fleeing persecution in England and conscription in Holland, they came to these shores believing their pilgrimage to be a holy “errand into the wilderness,” according to Perry Miller their greatest modern interpreter.

For the sake of that far-sighted dream, our Pilgrims endured persecution and hardship, and near-total estrangement from the meager comforts and securities of so-called civilization nearly four hundred years ago. Like Abraham and Sarah, and like the Christians of the 1st century, they were of necessity men and women of strong and enduring stuff, living precariously as refugees and strangers in a hostile and alien world for the sake of generations yet unborn. As a New England woman, Katherine Lee Bates, captured them in her classic American hymn:

*O beautiful for pilgrim feet, whose stern, impassioned stress
A thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.*

And of course, these Pilgrim Congregationalists were but a tiny fore-wave of the great tide of immigrant peoples whose once-alien hopes, dreams, labors, languages, cultures and religions have profoundly enriched the American story from their day forward to our own day.

III. Now, in some ways, a sojourning pilgrim is the most free of individuals. He or she may be totally lacking in power, privilege, property and the prerogatives of citizenship, but think how spiritually free that may leave a person. Though a pilgrim’s life may be hazardous, difficult, and often in tension with the surrounding indigenous

culture; he or she not really beholden to that culture's false gods, embedded prejudices, historic injustices, and dangerous self-deceptions.

A pilgrim can perhaps more readily appreciate the value of family and friends that more settled and comfortable folk may take for granted. A pilgrim can know just how precious is a square meal, a pair of shoes, a kindly word, a day's work, a roof overhead (even if it be just the top of a tent). A pilgrim must somehow discover how to remain hopeful and positive when others might indulge in useless self-pity and negativism. A pilgrim can find happiness in relationships and security in God while those who have sought comfort mainly in material things will always be fearful of losing that which they have purchased at so costly a price. A pilgrim, though he or she may be on foot in a land of maniac drivers, though he or she may be a tent-dweller among a people who generally have at least one place to go home to at night; a pilgrim may still experience a depth of inward freedom, gratitude and peace that you and I could stand to know more of.

There is a secret shared by all those who have come to terms with their own powerless and learned to feel "at home" wherever the love of God may lead them. The secret is those terribly entrenched, awesomely resourced, seemingly unchangeable insecurities, self-deceptions, pre-assumptions, limitations, injustices, abuses, difficulties, pressures and anxieties that sometimes appear to own and control our lives are not always as potent and immovable as they seem. Astounding things can happen when one lays aside one's own fear and need to control, and permits the Spirit of God to lead. As Carl Jung once observed: "Where love rules, there is no will to power."

And where love rules, the figure of the pilgrim, the sojourner, the refugee, the exile, the stranger, the foreigner emerges from the mists of time and memory, and again Abraham and Sarah, Jesus and the earliest Christians, the American Pilgrims and other immigrant peoples, walk beside us in the journey of life toward the city of God and the kingdom of heaven. May their depth of soul and their freedom of spirit be ours. And as for now: a blessed, safe and truly grateful Thanksgiving Day to one and all.