Sunday, June 5, 2005
**GOD IS STILL SPEAKING (Sermon for Installation of Conference Nebraska Minister)**
Genesis 12:1-3; Hebrews 1:l-3a

It is a privilege to be asked to preach the sermon for Roddy's Installation Service. During these past months, I've gotten to know Roddy and his family quite well. His wife and son are in our Handbell Choir and in the Plymouth Choir, which is here this morning for this worship service. The Search Committee made an excellent choice.

It's my 34th year as a minister serving the same congregation in the Nebraska Conference, so I believe I have seniority. When I came to the Nebraska Conference 34 years ago, Scott Libbey was the Conference Minister. He was followed by David Jamieson. When David moved to Northern California, he was succeeded by Clip Higgins after an interim Conference Minister. When Clip retired, there was another interim, and he was followed by George Worcester and now Roddy Dunkerson. This Conference has been blessed with outstanding Conference Ministers.

When Roddy invited me to be the preacher this morning, he gave me this advice. He said, "Think of yourself as the body at an Irish Wake. We need you to have the party, but no one expects you to say very much."

The theme of this year's Annual Conference is "GOD IS STILL SPEAKING ... HERE!" It's all a part of the United Church's "God Is Still Speaking" initiative. I appreciate the initiative because it reminds me of what Pastor John Robinson said to his congregation members who were coming to this country on the ship called the Mayflower. He had planned to come with them, but because of illness, he couldn't make the trip. He said, "Remember, there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word." In other words, "God is still speaking." I firmly believe God is still speaking, but like all slogans, it raises a number of questions in my mind and hopefully in yours as well.

Certainly, God is still speaking, but the questions are: What is God saying? Are you listening? How do you know it's God speaking and not your own self-interest or some false god you are worshiping? Years ago, there was a popular bumper sticker that said, "JESUS IS THE ANSWER." I kept wondering, Jesus might be the answer, but what is the question?

When I was a young child attending Sunday Church School, one of my favorite pictures in our classroom showed Jesus with children of every color gathered around him. Many of you are familiar with that picture. We also learned a song that went with the picture: "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight; Jesus loves the little children of the world." This song made a lasting impression on me, even though in my Sunday School class, all of us were children with light complexions.

Because of this picture and the song, I found Jesus easy to accept as a child. He loves all the children of the world, even me. Our teacher reminded us that Jesus came among us to demonstrate that God loves all the children of the world in the same way.

Later on, when I was a teenager and began to read some of the other stories in the Bible, I started to have some serious doubts about the character of God and what God had been saying to some people. I discovered a story in the book of Joshua where the Israelites kill every man, woman, and child in the towns of Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir. That

was terrible enough, but what shocked me even more was the reason the Bible gave for the killing: “Joshua left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded” (Joshua 10:40). Did God speak to Joshua and tell him to do this killing?

This didn’t sound like the God that Jesus revealed. When I questioned this command of God, I was given unsatisfying answers. One teacher said God was doing these children a favor since they would have grown up in an evil culture and ended up in hell. Then I found other passages in the Bible implying that these children and adults would have ended up in hell anyway because they didn’t have the right beliefs.

Another teacher said that maybe God ordered this massacre of all men, women, and children to protect the people of Israel from the evil that would have come through intermarriage with pagans. But then I wondered, why would such intermarriage be evil if it’s true, as the Bible teaches, that all human beings are created in God’s image?

Still, another teacher told me not to ask such questions. “The ways of God are mysterious,” she said. That too was not very helpful. Then I thought, maybe this teacher found this violent image of God hard to believe, but at the same time couldn’t overcome her belief that all the words and stories in the Bible are equally true.

As I continued to grow and mature in my faith, and as I experienced the grace and love of God in my life, and the more I studied the Bible and how it came to be, and the more I studied what biblical scholars had discovered, I began to learn how to evaluate Bible stories and how to determine whether or not it was God speaking in many of the stories. Some Bible stories and teachings more accurately portray what God is saying than others. Learning how to evaluate Bible stories and teachings allows for the possibility that some descriptions of God and God’s speaking are inaccurate. In the letter to the Hebrews, the writer acknowledges this fact: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, He has spoken by a Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also created the worlds.”

This Son, Jesus, in his life and teachings, provides the ultimate way of determining what God is saying. Here’s one example: The gospels tell you that one day Jesus was asked, “Which commandment is the first of all?” If he had believed all scriptures were of equal worth, he would have answered, “All the commandments are equally important.” Instead, he replied, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Then he added, “All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments of love of God and neighbor.” In other words, these commandments exalting love are as weighty as the rest of the Bible.

The central teaching of the Bible is that you are to love God and your neighbor in the same way that God loves you and all people. Paul wrote: “The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The priority of God’s love and grace means that I cannot accept Joshua’s claim that God commanded him to kill all the men, women, and children in Canaan. A God of love doesn’t murder His children or command you to do so. A God who has commanded me to love my neighbor doesn’t demand that I kill that same neighbor. If you think you hear God speaking, and what God is telling you to do in any way violates the rule of love of God and neighbor, then it’s not God that is speaking. The Bible says in the First Letter of John, “Beloved, do not

believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

Jesus demonstrated this all-embracing love. He healed lepers. He comforted prostitutes. He ate with outcasts. He forgave sinners. Those whom the world despised, he befriended. He died with love on his lips: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Some time ago, a woman from Lincoln who was not a member of First-Plymouth Church came to talk with me about a problem she had been facing for several months. She needed to come to a decision about it soon. She sought my counsel because she wondered, what, if anything, God wanted her to do? She believed God was still speaking, but what was God saying in her situation? She thought looking in the Bible might help. But after an exhaustive search, she concluded that the Bible had nothing directly to say about the decision she needed to make. She had also been praying about it but had not come away with any clear direction. Since her problem involved an ethical dilemma, she even tried researching what Christians throughout the centuries might have done in similar situations but found nothing that made sense in her present-day dilemma.

As a final resort, she decided to consult a minister and, for some reason, chose me. Her question was, "What are some of the ways that God's will and wisdom are made known to me and to others? How can this help me in making my decisions?" She believed God was still speaking but wanted more information on what God might be saying. We had a stimulating discussion about the ways in which God is still speaking through the Jewish and Christian traditions and how these traditions help a person know God's will and wisdom, and how it can help you in your day-to-day decisions.

I told her about Jesus and his teaching that love of God and neighbor should be the highest priority in determining whether or not it is God speaking. Ask yourself in each decision you are about to make: "Will doing this increase among people the love of God and neighbor or not?"

I also told her that Jesus' teachings were filled with wisdom and guidelines for discovering where and when God is speaking and what God is saying, and that much of his wisdom can be found in other parts of the Bible. For example, the wisdom literature of the Bible tells you that God's wisdom is in the world all around you and is actively seeking you.

The wisdom of God is built into the fabric of creation. It is also built into each one of you. You can find it in yourself, in nature, in the rhythms of life — in birth, growing up, marriage, work, and at death. You can learn about God and what God is saying to you by participating in life as fully as possible. In everyday living, you can meet God's wisdom, which is another way of describing how God is still speaking.

Here are some examples. In the book of Proverbs, you read, "Look at the ant. The ant is exceedingly wise. The ants are creatures without strength, yet they provide their food in the summer." If you observe the wisdom of the ant, you can learn how God wants you to prepare for the winter.

Steven Covey, in his book First Things First, calls this kind of wisdom the "Law of the Farm." In farming, you can easily see and agree that natural laws and principles play an important part in determining the harvest. However, in too many other areas of life, you might think you can dismiss natural processes, take shortcuts, cheat the system, and still win the day.

One example is “cramming” in school. Some students goof off during the semester and then study all night before the big test. They try to cram a semester’s worth of learning into their heads in one night. Can you imagine “cramming” on the farm? Can you goof off in the spring when you should be planting your crops, loaf in the summer, and then try at the last minute to force the seed into the ground, water it, fertilize it, and then hope for a good harvest in a few weeks? God is still speaking through such natural processes. Pay attention to them. That’s part of the wisdom God has built into creation.

I have a friend who recently had an offer for another job. More money. More prestige. According to conventional standards, it was an upward move. He told me it was very attractive. But then my friend listened to the voices of wisdom all around him. He then said to me, “I knew in my heart that this new position was not for me. I would have to spend too much of my time being anxious.” He could not have found this answer at the back of a book or even directly from the Bible. The answer was in many places. He listened to God speaking in many different ways.

It is not always easy to hear God speaking. Sometimes you have to put your emotions aside and listen to reason, and at other times, you have to put reason aside and pay attention to your emotions. There are times too when all you can do is pray, be patient, and wait.

You can be sure of this — God is always calling you to go forward in faith, in the same way as God called Abraham and Sarah. God’s will is the same for you as it was for them: that through you and the church, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Amen.