Sunday June 5, 2005
(Sermon for Installation of Conference Nebraska Minister)

GOD IS STILL SPEAKING,

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. Following an interim Conference Minister, David he was succeeded by Clip Higgins. When Clip retired, there was another interim and he was followed by George Worcester and now Roddy Dunkerson. This Conference has been blessed by having 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 I remember what Pastor John Robinson said to the members of his congregation who were coming to this country on the ship called the Mayflower. He had planned to come with them but because of illness could not 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 your minds 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 would question 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 eventually ended in hell. Then I found other passages in the Bible which implied 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 in order to protect the people of Israel from the evil that would have come through inter-marriage with pagans. Then I wondered why such intermarriage would be evil if it was true as the Bible taught 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 of the words and stories in the Bible are equally true.

As I continued to grow and mature in my faith and to experience the grace and love of God in my life, and the more I studied the Bible and how it came to be the Bible; 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 teaching 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 that 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 heavy as the rest of the Bible.

In other words, the central teaching of the Bible is that you are to love God and neighbor in the same way as 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, God's 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 the 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 the do."

Some time ago, an individual from Lincoln who was not a member of First-Plymouth Church came to talk with me about a problem she was facing which had been on her mind for several months. She needed to come to a decision about it soon. She was seeking my counsel because she was wondering, what if anything did God want 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 came to the conclusion that the Bible had nothing directly to say about the decision she needed to make. She also had been

praying about it but as yet had not come away with any clear direction. Since her problem involved an ethical dilemma, she even tried researching what Christians through the centuries might have done in making similar decisions but had found nothing that made sense in her present day dilemma.

As a final resort she had decided to consult a minister and had for some reason chosen me. Her question to me was: "What are some of the ways that God's will and God's 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 to 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 saying that love and God and neighbor were of 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 the teachings of Jesus were filled with other 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 and growing up and marriage and 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 work 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 of 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 you 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.