

Pilgrims

Hebrews 11:8-16; Genesis 15:1-6

Sunday, August 7, 2022 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

- Introduction

Way back in 16th century England, the original Congregationalists were meeting in people's homes and calling themselves "pilgrims". It had a special connotation back then. The Church of England, or Anglican Church (Episcopalian is the US version of the same) was the official state church and refusal to attend left one in danger of the charge of treason, or of at least insulting the king. There was a lot of pomp and ceremony, and the temptation of political power and money resulted in people seeking leadership in the church who only wanted power or money. Among those who recognized that there was a problem was a group called the "puritans", who felt that the Church of England could be purified from within. The other group, the original Congregationalists, called themselves "pilgrim" and they were not on the same page as the puritans even though we now associate the two words together as if identifying the same people. The pilgrims thought the Church of England was hopelessly corrupt and could not be purified. They thought that the government of England needed to allow citizens of England to choose or form their own church. This led the pilgrims to the Netherlands, and later to the New England coast. Some of their descendants are still there.

As I read the Bible, every practicing Christian is a pilgrim, traveling through the days of their lives, influenced by those who have made the pilgrimage before and in turn, influencing those who will take the pilgrimage after us. We are on a long journey that has been in process for many generations now. One that began centuries ago.

- Set the stage

We're part of a long tradition Genesis 15:1-6

Abraham and the covenant

The Christian life is a journey of faith that is part of a very long tradition. First of all, let's review the definition of faith, which I find in the Book of Hebrews 11:6, which says, "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who come to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him." Here is the very definition of faith: God exists and rewards those who seek Him. So have that in the back of your mind as we look back in time and consider an episode that changed history, and transformed our lives and many, many others. Out in the ancient desert of Israel, Abram and God have a conversation. Abram is frustrated that he and Sarah have no heir and they are well within their elder years despite the promise that they would have a son. God responded by telling him that they would have descendants that are as numerous as the stars in the sky. Abram believed, and it was accounted to him as righteousness. This appears several times in the New Testament (Romans 4:3,9,22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23) so the Bible clearly connects this event with the Christian life. Indeed God submits to a sacred ceremony vowing to keep promises and all Abram has to do is trust Him. He does so, and later Isaac was born and Abram (later Abraham) spent the rest of his life as a stranger in the Promised Land.

We and Abraham have the same destination Hebrews 11:8-16
strangers & pilgrims

Hebrews 11, in a startling twist, tells us that the Promised Land is a piece of property but points out that is not the actual, or final Promised Land. Abraham knew this even back then. Verse sixteen tells us “But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” That was Abraham’s true Promised Land, and it is ours as well. The journey of his life, the journeys of our lives, and the journeys of countless people of all nations and ages lead together to this same Promised Land. Your life is part of something much larger than the challenges of this present time. Because of this, they called themselves, “pilgrims”, temporary residents, and we do the same.

- Application
Tradition

One application I see to this is that we do ourselves a disservice if we look at our days on earth as an isolated series of years with a beginning and end and nothing more. We are part of a tradition, in Christ following a path taken by countless people before us and there will be more after us. It is a wonderful tradition that sees beyond these days and looks forward to the New Jerusalem, where there is a place for us. The old saying that “all roads lead to Rome” isn’t true. Our road leads to Jerusalem.

Roll with the punches

We live in a time of tremendous change, not all of it good. Knowing the temporary nature of this life, be willing to “roll with the punches”. Things change, and they will continue to change. The values of Christ remain the same: Prayer, Worship, Witness, Discipleship, Service. Invest these values in yourself and in others and you will not waste your days on earth, and you will be prepared for life beyond.

- Conclusion

The old Congregationalists of England, and then New England, viewed themselves as pilgrims on this earth, including the Vermont native who founded the first Congregational Church in Iowa before the Civil War. As practicing Christians, we are pilgrims as well, temporary residents of this life looking forward to and investing in the values of Christ as part of a long tradition of people journeying through this life on the way to the New Jerusalem, from Abraham all the way through people in this sanctuary today. We are pilgrims, let’s look at our lives as pilgrims.