

Do not be afraid!

Isaiah 41:1-10

September 24, 2006

One hundred and fifty years. A century and a half. Fifteen decades. The lifetimes of my grandfather and my grandfather's grandfather.

A civil war. Two world wars. Wars in the Caribbean and Korea and Viet Nam and Iraq.

The culmination of the industrial revolution, the onset of the information age. A great depression, unprecedented economic expansion, globalization. Automobiles and airplanes, atom bombs and vehicles for space exploration. Television, personal computers, cellular telephones.

Six charter members growing into a church family numbering at times over a thousand members. A church arising in a town of 1200 people, now part of a metropolitan community of 125,000 people.

Twenty-one pastors ... although just four in the last eighty-one years! Organists and choral directors, youth leaders and Christian educators, trustees and deacons and bell ringers and quilters.

One hundred and fifty years. We have so much to look back on, so much to be proud of ...

We can be proud of six courageous men and women who would not take the easy way and join an existing church, but felt so strongly about their congregational traditions and felt so strongly about their opposition to slavery, that they committed themselves to each other and to God in the founding of a new church, this church.

We can be proud of an ongoing commitment to effective ministry to children and youth. One of the very first Christian Endeavor groups, the first west of the Mississippi, was begun here more than a century ago. More recently young people from our church have traveled to Mexico and New Orleans, to West Virginia and Maine, to do mission work and to experience the joys of Christian community.

We can be proud of the two church buildings erected on the corner of Jefferson and West Fifth Streets, and this church building erected on the corner of West Fourth and South Streets with a foundation stone dated 1907, and the education and office wing added in 1959, and the Reuter pipe organ installed in 1975, and the renovation work done to enhance the beauty, functionality, accessibility, and technological capabilities of this facility.

We can be proud of church members who have provided leadership to school boards and service clubs, to the Red Cross and the United Way, to theater and symphony and Hawkeye Community College and the University of Northern Iowa.

We can be proud of meals served, food boxes distributed, miles walked and pigs kissed for hunger relief. We can be proud of hosting a childcare facility and signing on as a Partner-in-Education and staffing neighborhood after-school programs to benefit children in Waterloo. We can be proud of filling shoeboxes and layette bags to benefit children and their mothers in Nicaragua.

We have so much to be proud of, so much to remember, so many people to remember. Abram and John, Joseph and Cynthia, Levi and Mary, John O. and J. Richmond, Charles and Fern and Lucius, Ardythe and Bernice, Bill and Bob, Frank and Harriet, Jack and Keith, Marian and Martha and May and Marjorie, Red and Susan and Ann and Anne, Emily and Tyler and Elizabeth and Tanner ... and you!

One hundred and fifty years. We have so much to look back on, so much to remember. Will we have much to look forward to? Will our church, this church, have a future? Of course, it will! Listen to what Ike Leighty says. He knows whereof he speaks! Of course, it will!

Do not be afraid -- I am with you!, says the Lord.

But times have changed. Things are different now ...

Our church used to be one of the leading social and cultural institutions of this community, but now we are just one more among so many different churches. When our church was founded one hundred and fifty years ago, there were four churches in Waterloo. Now there are more than a hundred.

And the churches, the churches that seem to be growing, engage in a kind of aggressive evangelism and aggressive marketing that we are seemingly incapable of and would be reluctant to do anyway. They advertise; they recruit; they wear the faith on their sleeve; they get the media attention. It shouldn't have to be a competition, but if we don't compete with other churches for members, what kind of future will we have?

Do not be afraid -- I am with you!, says the Lord.

But we are getting old and our way of doing things is getting old. We like our traditions, we are comfortable with our style of worship, but they are traditions and a worship style that have been around for a long time. We don't want to give up what we like, but we want to be attractive to young people and to young families. We want to focus on substance, not on style, but if our style stays the same, are we doomed to fade into the sunset?

Do not be afraid -- I am with you!, says the Lord.

But the culture as a whole, not just church culture, is entirely different. Young families have so many demands on their time. Women and men work five days, six days, weekends. They need any opportunity they can get for rest and for recreation. And their kids have swimming and hockey and volleyball and soccer, dance lessons and violin lessons and karate lessons and band practice. There is so much pressure to be involved, to be active, to be engaged, to get ahead, to improve, to achieve, to overachieve ... so much pressure even on our children. The church has been relegated to the sidelines. People look elsewhere for support, for education, for enrichment, for fellowship. Who needs us anymore?

Do not be afraid!, says the Lord. I, the Lord, was there at the beginning, and I, the Lord, will be there at the end.

But times have changed, things are different now, different even than just ten years ago. We feel vulnerable now. We sense our own mortality. We are not impregnable. We are not invincible. The rest of the world -- for better or for worse -- can reach out and touch us.

We live under the dark cloud of the constant threat of terrorism, under the dark cloud of masses of people who do not like us. We do not feel safe anymore, at any time, in any place. We can't just turn the other cheek or walk the second mile. We can't just love our enemies. We can't just play by the rules. They don't play by the rules. Our love means nothing to them. The Sermon on the Mount may help quarreling church members work out their differences, but it makes lousy foreign policy!

I am your God -- let nothing terrify you! I will protect you and save you.

But some conversations, some debates, just don't belong in church: foreign policy, homeland security, the justification for war, the rules of interrogation, the need for warrantless wiretapping, immigration policies, the death penalty, the minimum wage, civil rights, gay rights, human rights. We can't resolve those issues here and we'll just upset people or offend people if we try. Religion is for taking care of souls and we'll take care of everything else somewhere else.

Be silent and listen to me!, says the Lord. Who has determined the course of history?

But you are just one god. Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists all have their gods. And universalists, pantheists, atheists all think they know something about what "god" is or isn't. Who is to say we're right and they're wrong. Or maybe everybody is right, in their own way. Or maybe everybody is wrong.

How can two people both claim to love and serve god, whatever god, and hate each other? How can people and nations kill and make war in the name of god? How can people of passionate religious faith see the world so differently? Maybe religion itself is the problem and we need different gods or maybe no god at all.

You, you are the people I have chosen ... You are my servant ... I did not reject you.

*Do not be afraid -- I am with you!
I am your God -- let nothing terrify you!
I will make you strong and help you ...*

We are not just like everybody else. We have been chosen. We have been claimed. We belong to the Lord. When the world is frightened and trembles with fear, we remember who we are, we remember whose we are, and we are not afraid. When the world calls on skilled workers and able technicians and mighty armies and reassuring politicians to construct its idols and make it feel safe, we remember who we are, we remember whose we are, and we put our trust in the Lord.

*I, the Lord, was there at the beginning,
and I, the Lord, will be there at the end!*

My friends! We are not yet at the end! We are not yet at the end of the world and we are not yet at the end of the life of this church! We have work to do! We have good news to proclaim, acts of justice and mercy to perform, peace to make! As Charles Jacobs urged on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of First Congregational Church: *Let us remember to love the past, to ... cherish it, but to keep our eyes on a far horizon.*

That far horizon is the kingdom of God, not a place to which souls escape after all the hardship and toil of life here on earth, but an earth made new, an earth made whole, an earth made good. Our task as God's own people is to pray for that kingdom and work for that kingdom, to pray *Your will be done* and to do it.

How many years will we have? How many years will this church have? Twenty years? Fifty years? Another one hundred and fifty years? More?

It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. With thanksgiving for all that has come before us, we move forward boldly and eagerly into the future that is still ahead of us, in faith, not trembling in fear, with hope, not consumed by despair, loving God and loving the world, not succumbing to hatred.

*Yes, God is still speaking to us,
and our eyes are on a far horizon.
May our voices be one
as we sing the world this song
of God's goodness and mercy and love!*

*I will sing to the Lord all my life;
as long as I live I will sing.
May the Lord be pleased with my song,
for my gladness comes from the Lord.*