A THIRD THANKSGIVING

Genesis 12: 1-9
Pilgrim Congregational Church

November 25, 1984
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Last Sunday morning, though I was not here to hear it, I am told that Jack preached a Thanksgiving sermon. And those of you who came to our worship service Tuesday night heard another Thanksgiving sermon from Greg Flint. This morning may well be overkill. But last Wednesday, when I began to write a sermon from the appointed lectionary texts for this morning, half way into it, I pulled page 3 out of my typewriter and threw the whole thing into the trash. My heart was not in that sermon and it showed. So I thought I would take the risk of testing your patience, and talk to you all this morning again about Thanksgiving, hopefully from a different perspective than your two previous sermons, because that is where my heart is this day, that is where my thoughts have been this past week or so.

It all started a week ago Thursday when Jack and I were in his office, and we spent some time talking about his recent encounters with the medical profession and what they might mean for him, for me, and this church. Then we went from there by some conversational route to discussing our mutual love of reading the works of our seventeenth century forbears. Out came this copy of William Bradford's Of Plymouth Plantation, which Jack had checked out from the public library, and we read aloud our favorite parts to each other, with stories and laughter, finally coming to the reading which you heard this morning, which we also decided to use as a call to worship last Tuesday. And then the phone rang, and there was my friend Joan, who brought me the news that she would be flying in from Washington, D.C. to spend this thanksgiving holiday with me and Chick. All of these things together form my thoughts about Thanksgiving this year: the goodness of my work and the goodness of doing that work with Jack Fitzgerald; the pain of his illness for him and his family, for me and this church; the wonderful surprise of Joani's visit; and the story of a scraggly malnourished group of Pilgrims who having braved the great journey across the sea fell to their knees and gave thanks to God despite the fact that all that lay ahead of them was hard work, and pain, and fear and hardship, to create a new society in a new land.

Life is so good, and yet it is so painful, and the goodness and the pain do not live separately from each other, but are intermingled, inseparable, part of each other and with each other. I now understand that if we are to give our true thanksgiving to God, it should not be and will not be for the blessings of our life in some way apart from the pain, but for the wholeness of it all: pain and pleasure, joy and weeping, the days of dancing and days of despair. All of this together is what makes for the goodness of life. All this together nurtures our appreciation of our lives as a gift of God.

Last Thursday evening we were gathered around the table - Chick and I, and Joani, and Jessie, with the good china and flowers and candles and much too much food for our small gathering. And I wanted to cry because I was so happy and my life seemed so complete; and I wanted to cry because itseemed unfair that I was so happy while so many others are not so happy; and I wanted to cry because now when I count family, I have lost my grandmother, and my father, and one sister. And as we paused in blessing, all of that was present in me, and all of that I could and did raise up to God as my Thanksgiving for the depth and goodness of human life.

I think of Abraham and his journey in the wilderness, with so much

left behind and so much still ahead of him, raising up an altar to God in the midst of nowhere in thanks for the goodness of his life and the promise God had given him. And then three thousand years later, our Pilgrim fathers and mothers arriving on the edge of a vast and unknown wilderness, and setting up their community and building their first meeting house. It was a place to go and worship God in times of harvest and times of famine, times of birth and death, for the coming of ships from across the sea; ships which brought desperately needed supplies, old friends and also diphtheria epidemics. All these things together were the parameters of their lives, the good mixed with the bad, and for it all, for the wholeness of it all, they blessed their God.

We too, like Abraham and his family, like the Scrooby settlers who landed at Plymouth, we are all of us Pilgrims here, with much we have left behind in the journey of our lives--old dreams, broken promises, people we have loved, pain now healed, the illusions that we miss, and the illusions we are grateful to have lost. And ahead of each one of us there is more work, more pain, more loving, more crying, moments of wild joy, and moments of darkness. It would be too simple if we understood that what we do on the day we call Thanksgiving, what we do at all times when our hearts are full and we turn to God in prayer...it would be too simple to say that what we are doing is thanking God only for the good things, the easy things, the events which do not challenge our lives or our faith. We donot say "Thank you God, for the one day of sunshine, for my child when she is well behaved, for my work which yesterday brought me no problems". That is not what we pray either out loud or in the silence of our hearts. Instead we say, "Thank you God for this land" with its beauty and its brutality; "Thank you for our families" who bring us both unexpected love and endless conflict and frustration; "thank you for the gift of work" which some days is a joy and others a heavy discipline. We do this, not because we are masochists, not because we are naively ignoring the bad things in life. We do this because at some fundamental level of our being, whether we think about it consciously or not, we know that all the best things inour lives, all that gives our lives meaning, all that is most profoundly and truly good, carries with it thismixedness - shades of light and darkness, both pain and joy. Our acts of thanksgiving are not acts of discernment, of separating out the good from the bad, the beautiful from the ugly, but celebrations of what we know of the wholeness of life and faith, which is that this is creation broken and distorted, but still holding the image of our God, still profoundly beautiful.

Last Thursday I ate too much turkey and snapped at my husband, and had some wonderful moments of closeness, and felt loved, and misunderstood, and wanted to hold my daughter forever when I wasn't contemplating putting her up for adoption. I cherished those who were gathered around me, and thanked God for my life in Duluth. I missed other Thanksgivings with a different family constellation; I missed the people I loved from whom I was separated by distance, by death, by estrangement. There was time to relax and too many dishes. The day was endlessly long and much too short. It was Thanksgiving - all of it - and I thank God for it - all of it. Like Abraham, like the Pilgrims with a capital P of the year 1620, like the rest of you in this moment of time, I set up an altar in a resting place in the wilderness of my life, and blessed the God who made this earth, and made us, and in all its mixedness, made it all so very good. Amen.