

Sermon given by John H. Kemp  
Pilgrim Congregational Church  
Duluth, Minnesota  
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## THE BEST IS YET TO BE

Isaiah 65:17-19  
Acts 1:6-9

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THE BEST IS YET TO BE: these words penned by poet Robert Browning speak to us as we celebrate our 125th Anniversary. In different ways we've remembered our rich heritage as a church - our enjoyable recollections this morning; the always interesting displays in Salter Hall, our colonial Thanksgiving service, Peace and Justice Sunday last week: all have shared something of our story. Hopefully, though, we're on much more than a nostalgia trip.

That *can* be a temptation. Sometimes those old days do look pretty good. They did for those well-meaning but often frightened, shortsighted disciples. Take that incident that begins the Book of Acts, the very beginning of their story as Apostles of Jesus Christ. They had come together to be with their risen Savior. A powerful, gripping moment. What do they ask him first off? "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?"

A truly incredible question! For three years Jesus had taught them of a completely *new* kingdom, so radically different from the expectations of his people that he was crucified for his teaching. And now the disciples ask their risen Christ right off, "Will you now *restore* the kingdom to Israel?" Will you return us to great David's glory, to Solomon's splendor? Lord, in your risen power, just turn back the clock for us! Take us back to those great days of our past. That's what we really want, what we expect from you!

Once again, they'd missed his whole point. Jesus was not in the restoration business, not at all. Jesus made Zaccheus a new man; he made of Mary Magdalene a new woman. Jesus makes new persons and kingdoms, not retreads. And he put his people to work creating that new kingdom of love and reconciliation. It was no free ride, no harvest without planting. God does our work with us, but not for us. So Jesus answered his disciples: "You shall be my witnesses...here and to the ends of the earth." Peace doesn't happen: it requires peacemakers. The gospel doesn't happen: it needs to be lived in all its radical newness. And those first disciples? Soon the Spirit of God descended on and filled those disciples on that first Pentecost - and *they* went out to proclaim that gospel in their lives to all the world.

In Jesus *we* discover, not a return to the past and past ways, but new life built on his new commandments, that we should love one another, even as he loved us. Even when we're much in love with yesterday, God urges us into a future where "the best is yet to be."



And in the fall of 1870 there were people in the young, growing settlement of Duluth with that very vision. They appealed to the Congregational Superintendent of Home Missions: "The opportunity for a good working Christian man, of large heart and clear head, one who can preach fair English and yet is not afraid to take poor men and rough men by the hand - for such a man the opportunity is a rare one."

Charles C. Salter of Missouri was that man; he accepted the call, and one hundred twenty five years ago, Pilgrim Church was organized by a Council with sixteen charter members. A Sunday School was organized at the close of the first Sunday service on January 22, 1871, with eight children and twenty-four adults. Not long after, a Women's Missionary Society was formed and in 1874 the first recorded gift to missions - \$125. Salter would in time leave Pilgrim to become a deeply revered minister to Duluth's poor through his Bethel Mission.

Even through the devastating Panic of '73, when many new churches gave up the ghost, Pilgrim members were determined that their congregation had a future - and indeed it did! Through a church trial of a pastor who had falsely accused his wife of "being an immoral and wanton woman," through a fire that gutted the first full-sized church building weeks after its completion, Pilgrim persevered - and grew. Barely twenty years old, it sponsored Herbert Irwin as missionary pastor to the Armenians in Turkey and soon after was sponsoring a home missionary to Grand Marais and scholarships to black students at Fisk University in Nashville. By 1921, year of a gala fiftieth anniversary, membership had grown to over 1600 as Noble Elderkin began his memorable decade-long pastorate. Church School, youth work, scouting, and a host of other activities made this then new building a most lively place as Pilgrim saw its ministry to young people as building for the future.

In the depths of the depression Pilgrim took another, very different, stake in the future as Ray Phillips, raised and ordained here, became our special mission representative to South Africa where he served until 1958, educating black South Africans who would become leaders of their freedom movement.

So the story is told. None of these forebears knew what the future held for this people, yet in faith they gave themselves to the life and mission of this church in their time. So have succeeding generations right down to this 125th year. Indeed, we, too, are part of this story.

Like Abraham and Sarah of old, we, too, are called to journey with faith into an uncharted, unpredictable future, knowing but one certainty: our God *will* be with us, offering us strength and guidance for the day - and, friends, that's the *only* certainty we really need! You see, the final gift of grace is not that we believe in God, but that God believes in us, imperfectly human as we are! *This* is our hope; *this* is our assurance that "the best is yet to be."

That's why in this time of anniversary, we don't look back with nostalgia, asking a restoration of past glories, but we celebrate the faithful of the past and we learn from them - from both their successes and failures - as today we move toward a new time. God surely goes with us on our Pilgrim journey together!