

While on my sabbatical, Tom and I listened to some music. Tom knows a lot about music and feels it deeply. He explained to me how a fugue is composed.

It occurred to me that a fugue’s composition offers a metaphor for our year’s centennial. (If you don’t know, on May 20, 2012, this church will celebrate its 100th anniversary.) I asked Tom to share with you as he did with me about fugues, and afterwards, I will expand on the metaphor of variations on a theme. (Tom here)

A fugue is a musical form, that is, a pattern for constructing a musical piece, to music what a sonnet or a limerick is to poetry. Bach is the universally acknowledged master of the form, but people started writing fugues about a century before he did, and many later composers from Beethoven and Brahms to Shostokovich have used the form (especially in vocal music). Even the musical “West Side Story” has a fugue in one of its dance numbers.

A fugue’s sole purpose is to thoroughly explore a musical theme, a simple musical idea. Here is the theme of a one of the simplest but most elegant fugues Bach ever wrote, the fugue in C-minor from the Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I. Listen: (PLAY THEME). Bach’s whole fugue is based on this simple two-measure musical idea.

Fugues have a very characteristic beginning: the theme is stated first in one voice alone, then by a second voice in a different key, then by a third voice in the original key, and so on, alternating until all voices have entered. My example Bach fugue has three voices, so there are three statements of the theme, starting with the alto, then the soprano and finally the bass (with a couple measures of transition between the last two): (PLAY ENTRANCES). This entrance part of a fugue is an extremely powerful way to state a musical idea, particularly in vocal music where the successive addition of voices powerfully builds a sense of firm purpose and intensity. Listen to this excerpt from Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, where Handel uses a fugal entrance scheme to convey the power and inevitability of the statement “And He shall reign for ever and ever.” (PLAY EXERPT).

The rest of a fugue typically consists of an alternation of “episodes” and further statements of the theme. An episode usually plays around with bits of the theme, exploring their musical possibilities, tossing the bits back and forth between the voices. This exploration sets up a new context for hearing the theme, so that when the theme is restated (often in a different key), you hear it differently, your attention reshaped by what you have heard in the episode. For example, this excerpt from the Bach C-minor fugue starts with the last entrance in the entrance section, followed by an episode that tosses around the theme’s first five notes while moving us toward a new statement of the theme, which sort of sneaks in in the soprano in a surprising major key. Listen: (PLAY EPISODE).

And so the fugue goes on, episode alternating with restatements of the theme. Each restatement is recognizable as a reappearance of the same idea, but because of the new musical context established by the previous episode, it is also subtly different: we hear the theme in new keys and/or hear new things about it. Bach also sometimes restates the theme in longer notes, begins or ends it in unexpected ways, or even presents the theme upside down. By the end, we have joyfully experienced the possibilities inherent in a simple idea, an idea that keeps coming back but yet is ever new.

Our church’s history is like a fugue, as Joyce will now explain...

For almost 100 years this church has had a theme. This theme is talked about in different ways, with different words, but I believe we could sum it up with the theme our bulletin offers us today. We as church have wanted to be a place of blessing.

Over the years our theme, given the cultural context in which church members lived, has shown various nuances and emphases. Its priorities have changed as it has tried to be faithful. The gifts of pastors and people have shaped its theme. But the theme of church has been to be a place of blessing.

So just as a fugue's theme is played in different keys, tempos, inversions, and so on, our church's theme, "to be a blessing," developed guided by the Spirit. Lisa Kopanke is writing an updated church history in which each chapter takes a decade and highlights what was happening in our the world and in this church. I am thrilled to share excerpts from her first chapter encompassing 1900-1919.

It is the beginning of the 20th century and the world is changing quickly. The 1900s brought us the invention of the Kodak Brownie Camera, the Teddy Bear, the first license plates issued in the U.S., Corn Flakes, the first Electric Washing Machine, Plastic, and Oreo Cookies.

The world got bigger with events like the first flight at Kitty Hawk, the first message to travel around the world, the first World Series and the official opening of the Panama Canal.

Our minds were expanded when Freud publishes *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Einstein proposes the Theory of Relativity, and Picasso introduces Cubism.

All the inventions that brought us new forms of communication also informed us of often shocking World News. "The Titanic Sinks", "U.S. Enters World War I" and "Treaty of Versailles Ends World War I."

On May 20, 1912 forty-six people formed the interdenominational Union Church in the small town of San Dimas, California, with a population of less than 2000 people. The town was nestled among thriving citrus groves and completely dedicated to serving the citrus industry; at one time they shipped more lemons than anywhere else in the United States.

Union Church was named appropriately as the members came from ten different denominations: Baptist, Catholic, Christian, Congregational, Episcopal; Friends (Quaker), Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Universalist. At first, the services were held upstairs in the Hoke Building on Bonita Avenue. Plans were made for construction of a new church building, but the freeze of 1913 which destroyed the citrus crops and devastated the local economy put building plans on hold.

In 1915, our 2nd pastor, Rev. Horace Mallows engineered the purchase this property for \$1400. Construction of the church began in 1917, at a cost not to exceed \$10,000. The church was built in the manner of a theater.

The main part of the sanctuary was sloped from back to front where a large screen could be lowered from the top of the proscenium. Theater style seating flanked the center aisle. The sanctuary was not only a place to worship, but also as a community center for open forums and speeches by prominent speakers. It was even used for movies.

Indeed, the first twenty years of the 20th century proved to be prolific years for the world and our little church. In a small suburb thirty miles east of Los Angeles, forty-six people had started a new church, fought back from financial devastation from the freeze of 1913, built a new church building, reached out to the community by sharing their facility and prospered. The Union Church in San Dimas faced the new decade securely settled and strong in their hope and faith.

Eventually we will have Lisa's full text focusing on each decade's variation on our theme. Last Sunday, today, and next week our biblical texts have told us about our religious ancestors of long, long ago (much longer than just 100 years); we've heard the stories of patriarchs of faith in whose lives the divine moved and dwelled and had its being.

We ended last Sunday with Jacob stealing his brother Esau's birth-right. Listen to how Frederick Buechner tells what happened next:

It happened just after he'd ripped Esau off and was making his getaway into the hill country. When sunset came and nobody seemed to be after him, he decided that it was safe to camp out for the night, and having left in too much of a hurry to take his bedroll with him, tucked a stone under his head for a pillow and prepared to go to sleep.

You might think that what happened next was that he lay there all night bug-eyed as a result of his guilty conscience or if he did finally manage to drop off, that he was tormented by conscience-stricken dreams, but neither of these was the case. Instead he dropped off like a baby in a cradle and dreamed the kind of dreams you would have thought were reserved for the high saints.

He dreamed that there was a stairway reaching up to heaven and that there were angels moving up and down it with golden sandals and rainbow-colored wings and that standing somewhere above it was God. And the words God spoke in the dream were not the chewing-out you might have expected but something altogether different.

God told him that the land he was lying on was to belong to him and his descendants and that someday his descendants would become a great nation and a great blessing to all the other nations on earth. And as if that wasn't enough, God added a personal P.S. by saying, 'Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.'

When Jacob wakes up he says: "Surely, the Lord is in this place." That nowhere land where the fugitive Jacob camps out one lonely night becomes a place of blessing.

In spite of our Jacob's humanness, hubris, and deceit, he will be a vessel of God's blessing. This is good news for it means that whatever failings and failures we have, whatever adversity we face from without or within, we too may be a blessing.

In the months ahead we will see how this church (in spite of shortcomings and hardships) add their variations on a theme: to be a blessing. And all the while we may ponder: how will we compose our own variation on the theme: to be a blessing?