

“Variations on a Theme: Promise of Presence” Exodus 33:12-23 October 23, 2011
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

Each month we’ve reflected in worship on one decade (one ten year span) of our church history as we continue towards our centennial celebration next May. Today we’ve reached the 4th decade of our church’s 100 years, the years between 1942 and 1952.

Much was happening in the world. WWII continued to be fought; in 1943, 40% of all vegetables produced in the U.S. came from victory gardens. The Warsaw ghetto uprising was in 1943, and 4000 Polish officers were found in a mass grave, and the U.S. invaded Italy; in 1944 U.S. troops landed at Normandy and in the Philippines. In 1945, Germany surrendered, and Auschwitz and Buchenwald were liberated. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke the baseball color barrier, the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, and \$540 million of food was sent from the U.S. to Europe. In 1948, the USSR blockaded West Berlin, Gandhi was assassinated, and Israel was created. In 1949, The People’s Republic of China was proclaimed; and RCA introduced the 45-rpm record. In 1950, the National Council of Churches of Christ was organized. In 1951, NBC began commercial color TV broadcasts, and the U.S. produced 400,000 pounds of penicillin. In 1952, Eisenhower resigned his NATO post in June and was elected president in November. That’s just a tiny bit of world events.

The church, too, was busy in this decade. One of the histories written about this church describes these as “the glory years,” and it had a lot to do with Rev. Francis Ellis, who was pastor here for 11 years. Our small chapel is named for him and his picture hangs on the wall. Rev. Ellis must have been an exceptionally good pastor. During his time the church grew, and I read that by our 40th anniversary, our membership was 400.

One of the things I read and admired greatly about him was his interest in the children of San Dimas and the many activities for them that he organized. As San Dimas grew, so did the church and all its groups, such as the Women’s Guild, Shipmates, and the music program.

In addition to strengthening the church inwardly, the church looked outward. In the records, we read that money was raised to send to Europe, where many were starving. The programs of the Women’s Guild showed an interest in outreach to India, Alaska, Native Americans, and citrus grove workers. Rev. Ellis was an inspired preacher as well as a good pastor, and he also wrote poetry. The benediction we still sing in our closing circle, he composed. I wish I’d known him; I’m sure I would have been a fan.

I think the only negative about Rev. Ellis was that he was so good that he became the focus of those “glory years.” When I arrived here in 2005, I heard, over and over, the name of Rev. Ellis lifted up almost in a spirit of hero worship. I figured he would always be the one I was measured against. In recent years the comparisons have lessened, and I just want to say that I hope when I’m gone, people don’t throw me up to the next pastor!

It’s easy to idealize strong leaders; but the church is really not about a strong pastor. The church always has a God focus. We pastors are human beings; most of us try very hard to do our best. But the church is not the pastor; the church is all the people coming together for the purpose of worshiping God and service to God’s world.

It is appropriate that today, on Children’s Sabbath, we remember Rev. Ellis and his devotion to children. We have an opportunity to follow in his footsteps and honor our children today by taking a specific action.

Christina is so careful about our children and about doing what we need to do to comply with our insurance guidelines. So all of us who volunteer and work with our children or anticipate doing so are invited today on this Children's Sabbath and in remembrance of Rev. Ellis, to fill out the forms so that we are up-to-date on our child safety forms.

Today's text from Exodus is a conversation between Moses and God. Moses puts God on the spot. He says, "God, you have asked me to bring up this people, but you haven't told me who was going to help me. You say, God, that I have found favor, but you haven't shown me your ways." Pretty straightforward language for just a little talk with God! Then God makes a promise to Moses. God promises God's presence. From this moment on, Moses no longer stands alone, but Moses stands on the promises of God.

Though God allows Moses the Divine presence, Moses is not allowed to see God's face. God is always a little apart from the great leader of the Israelites. Perhaps this keeps Moses humble in the face of the challenges he faces leading a great migration and holding various tribes together as they create a new nation. God at a distance also encourages us to ask if our aspirations are the same as God's. Do our plans coincide with the Divine's dream for the world? I've seen churches rationalize that what they want to do is quite naturally consistent with what they are sure God wants as well. Humility is a good spirit to hone.

Over the past couple of weeks I've read many Psalms. It is intriguing how the Psalmist often weaves both feelings that God has abandoned him with feelings of God's close and abiding presence. Seems this is true of us even today. We often feel the presence of God close at hand, but at other times, we feel God is far from us. The good news is that God's presence doesn't depend on how we feel; God's presence is based on God's promise and God's faithfulness.

You'll soon receive your November Newsletter and in it information about our church planning for the year 2012, which will be here very soon. As we plan both our spiritual commitments and our financial ones, it is good to remember our theme for our Centennial: "To Be a Blessing." The specifics of how to be a blessing are all variations on that theme. All we plan for and anticipate for the future is so that we can be a blessing for God.

It is encouraging to know that if we choose to live fully in God's unfolding in history, we do not stand alone. It helps me when I think the world is falling to pieces to remember whose world it is and that I alone am not responsible for fixing it. And yet, if we are faithful, if we do our best, than perhaps those who've come before us, like Rev. Ellis and all who worshiped here in our 4th decade, may indeed find us to be faithful.