

Christ Community Covenant Church
'O Pioneers,' Isaiah 43: 15-21
Pastor Rick Mylander – November 17, 2013

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. That is how churches were often greeted in the Bible, and so it's the way I would like to greet you today. It is really good to be with you. I greet you also on behalf of our lead superintendent Tammy Swanson-Draheim, and from your 100 sister churches in our six-state region. You have been mission partners with us a very long time, and we are deeply grateful.

The MWC is not some office somewhere out there; the MWC is churches working together to transform lives and communities by starting new churches, strengthening existing churches and developing missional leaders. It's what we all do together, and I thank you for your support and prayers for us, as we continue to support and pray for you.

4Cs, I have followed your story over the years relative to your building needs, have prayed for you often. It is a complicated journey that you have walked. Why? I do not know. And now you have a faith step before you that some of you are probably saying, "Wow, the Lord's deliverance at the 11th hour, it's what God had for us all along..." And others of you are saying, "Well, it's not everything I had hoped for..."

I want to take some time with you this morning not only to commend you for this hard decision... and it WAS hard... Not only to commend your church leaders for their very difficult work in seeking a solution to your circumstance – and it WAS difficult. You guys have had the rug pulled out from underneath you so many times that you've got rug burn, floor burn, heartburn, bridge burn, candle burn, you name it. So I want to commend you as a church and to commend your leaders. But most of all I want to commend you to God as you go forward with it. Though your facility situation is settling a bit, there's a bit of unsettling that I want you to keep in your spirit, because this world is not our home. And it is that unsettling thing that I'd like to share with you today.

In your bulletins you have an insert with our Bible passages. Will you pull that out? The title for the message is "O Pioneers." The Isaiah text is our main one; the other two are ones for good measure. When I was young and it was our birthday, we got a playful birthday spanking, a whack on the behind with a broom for every year of our lives, then one for good measure, and finally a pinch to grow an inch. As you make this move, may God grant you the ability to grow way more than an inch!

I'd like for us to read the first passage, the main one, together. Then we'll split the other two up a bit by left and right sides of the room.

[15] I am the Lord, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. [16] Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, [17] who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: [18] 'Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. [19] Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness, streams in the desert. [20] The wild beasts will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness and rivers in the desert to give drink to my chosen people, [21] the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise.' (Isaiah 43: 15-21)

[1] Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country -- and your kindred -- and your father's house -- to the land that I will show you. [2] And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you... so that you will be a blessing." (Genesis 12:1-2)

[13b] ..But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, [14] I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14)

How many of you here are Colorado natives? Raise your hand. OK, how many of you were from Nebraska? Wyoming? Kansas? Iowa? Missouri? All of these were the great westward expansion states through which pioneers had to pass in order to go settle somewhere else further west.

The first eight and a half years of my ministry here in the Midwest Conference I lived in Nebraska. Nebraska, like Colorado is a pioneer state. It was smack dab in the middle of the westward expansion, the “Westward, ho!” mentality of pioneer America. Crossing Nebraska from east to west is the famous Oregon Trail over which countless thousands passed in the 1800’s on their way to farmland in Oregon and Washington, gold in California, refuge in Utah. Starting with a trickle of the most daring adventurers, and culminating with enormously long, dusty wagon trains, pioneers passed Chimney Rock, a landmark which they could see rising up out of the rough, western terrain for scores of miles. Nebraska contains one of the largest sections of any state of the Pony Express Trail. Passing through huge expanses of unpopulated territory, celebrated young riders connected the Midwest with the west coast in a matter of 10 days or less in 1860 – unheard of speed of communication in its time, as remarkable in its day as wireless technologies in ours. On through Nebraska the great Union Railroad would culminate its western march with the driving of a golden spike two states away and over halfway to the Pacific Ocean. Even on Nebraska’s eastern border, the Missouri River, Louis and Clark traveled on behalf of President Thomas Jefferson in 1804-06, studying the terrain bought in the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States at a cost of three pennies per acre.

Which brings us to our own state. The Louisiana Purchase included over half of Colorado, everything east of the Continental Divide. And though Colorado was not a through state like Nebraska, because of that big wall of mountains we love so much here, it, too, was a pioneer state. Famous in our history are the pioneering Mexicans of the 1700’s and 1800’s who populated the southern part of our state when Colorado was part of Mexico. Or the mountain men who came here trapping in the 1800’s; the expeditions who came here mapping; and yes, we had our own wagon trains, unnumbered travelers along the Santa Fe Trail in southeast Colorado, doing business between Kansas City and Santa Fe; and finally, the floodgates opening with the discovery of gold here in the Denver area in 1858, and the torrent of gold-seekers that came in 1859, Pikes Peak or Bust.

It is this free-flowing movement and this wild, pioneer spirit that created our state. And so on their way through or on their way to make a buck, many decided that it would become a fine place to live. And so, about nine years ago, Colorado became home also to me when our Midwest Conference staff was decentralized. Will I be a pioneer or a settler? Only time will tell. But it is the pioneer upon whom I’d like to focus our time together today. In both Nebraska and Colorado, we have our literary heroes who tell the stories of the pioneers, Willa Cather or David Lavendar, Isabella Byrd or James Michener; stories of trial and error, feast and famine, life and death, as families overcome great odds to establish a productive and prosperous future for their offspring. Pioneers, who become settlers... Indulge me for a moment, as we talk about pioneers: God does new things through pioneers.

Now, there is a difference between pioneers and settlers. We sometimes can see them with the same lenses, as we do our little history together. But pioneers and settlers are as different as can be. Pioneers launch into the unknown, or the less known, whereas settlers capitalize on what the pioneers discovered. Pioneers brave the elements, carving a path in a pathless environment, tilling untilled ground, whereas settlers exploit the surroundings for greater profitability. Pioneers move. Settlers park. Pioneers encounter new things, new opportunities. Settlers cherish only the familiar.

And then I think of the great heroes of the Bible, and I realize that so many more of them were pioneers than settlers...

Abraham, told to go to a land he did not even know...

Joseph, employed by God in a strange environment, all to show that God was mighty to save...

Deborah the judge, whose open-air office was under a palm tree...

David, small in the eyes of men and women, but large in the eyes of God...

The **prophets**, Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others, who were willing to stand alone for God in the face of hostile adversity...

Mary the mother of Jesus... accepting a task that meant the sacrifice of everything that was familiar...

Mary the sister of Martha, who showed us that it is often better simply sitting in the presence of Jesus than doing stuff for him.

The **disciples**... who were asked to leave everything and follow hard after Jesus.

Paul, who would be shown just how much he would suffer for the name of Jesus...and

Jesus Himself, a Pioneer Who spanned an expanse you and I cannot fathom...

O, Pioneers... The Prophet Isaiah in the wonderful passage we read speaks of a God who is not about accomplishing His wonders along the well-worn and familiar path, the paths along which broken-down chariots [and Fords] and exhausted horses and warriors [and travelers] lie. He is a God who is so creative He makes footpaths on the sea! Now, I have spent a lot of time near water in my life – I grew up near Lake Michigan in Chicago, I love the Northwoods' lakes, I have spent hundreds of hours over the years doing my favorite thing, walking along the seashore – but when I pass through the water and turn and look behind, there is no path. But God makes paths on the seas. He does **new** things, makes ways in **our** wilderness, streams in **our** deserts, creates **new** chances for His people to declare His praise... And God has great blessings in store for those who are willing to walk this pioneering path with Him.

Many people think that creating church renewal or revival will mean a return to the old paths and ways. And yet Isaiah reminds us to '... not consider the things of old...' ***It seems a basic principle in the Bible and throughout church history that the renewal of existing things almost always happens as a byproduct of starting new things, going new places.*** Isaiah is not saying that we should disregard the things of the past, or consider them unimportant. He just says that we should not base our hopes on them, not look to them as the springboard for renewal. God is going to make all things new. We who are in Christ are a new creation. Yes, the church is a new creation for a new day of mission. Where God wants to go is not an old place, but a new one – it's where pioneers go...

The question is: are we pioneer churches, or are we homestead churches? Pioneering usually gives way to homesteading, unless pioneering is in your spirit. 4Cs, no matter how attractive this building looks to you right now, please, I plead with you, keep the pioneer spirit. Are we inspired by the stories of the settlers who laid out town-sites and put up fences, or by the stories of the pioneers who just kept passing through because they knew that this place was not their real home? Whether it's the Bergson family or Pa Ingalls in the ***Little House*** series, I cast my lot with the pioneers. For as missionary Don Richardson told 1000 Covenant leaders at a gathering several years ago, ***homesteading is a half-Covenant response to a whole-Covenant God. And a half o' Covenant is no Covenant...***

Because my friends, you and I are only passing through as well (as in the song "This World is not my Home"). Even in some church-planting missions, pioneers are tempted too quickly to become settlers, forgetting that it is new territory Christ implores us to occupy for His Kingdom. There is a time for settling...it's called heaven.

Now, before I close, I'd like to talk briefly about bearings; I'll save the bulk of this for another sermon some time but I'd just like to touch on it. Pioneers and adventurers have used bearings for centuries to successfully traverse new territory. Oh, they were on their way somewhere, but they weren't without guidance, whether it was the position of the sun by day or the stars by night... Whether they had a little magnetized needle in a compass to guide them by always pointing the same direction, they had bearings. And so do we. God gives them to us.

Many churches that have lost their vitality, or that have misplaced their call, have simply lost their bearings. The Bible says they can be re-found. God has made it one of His wonderful specialties to find lost things, lost people, even lost bearings. What are the bearings we always need to rediscover? What for us would point us to true north, true east, true south, true west? How can we re-establish our directional coordinates?

North is truth... and south is grace... Celebrating as Covenanters the right balance between truth on the one hand and grace on the other will always begin to put us back on half of the right trajectory, half of our bearing. North and south provides the vertical perspective, our personal relationship with God, the balance between truth -- the justice of God before whom no man or woman can alone stand, and grace -- the peace of God which passes what man or woman can understand. So, north is truth and south is grace, the plumb-line, and a very Covenant plumb-line at that.

East is service... and west is transformation... [These 'coordinates' compliments of Jim Harrelson]. East is where we are; west is where we're going. Celebrating as Covenanters the right balance between current ministry, current service for the King, and transformation for His future Kingdom. This gets us back our horizontal dimension, the other half of our bearing. The balance between east and west is critical, just as is the balance between truth and grace. Because east and west is the

horizontal plain, and on this plain lies the human relational dimension of our walk with God; it balances my need for ministry with the need of the next generation. It keeps us moving toward new vistas, creating new wineskins for new wine. **North is truth, south is grace, east is service, west is transformation.**

I believe it was Horace Greeley, the mid-1800's newspaper editor back east who coined the phrase, "Go west, young man, go west." And many did. Interesting though, many went with a settler attitude, bringing along scads of things that they would eventually discard. Well into the 1900's, one could find along the Oregon Trail discarded stuff – pianos, bureaus and other furniture, expensive china – things they realized along the way were not truly essential to the task. How about us? What will we leave behind? Stuff that was superfluous, that really didn't matter? Or will we leave behind things that outlast us? 4Cs, you have an amazing opportunity before you, moving into a building that is going to be your home for a good long while. Whatever you do, don't settle there. Use it as a base to be 'out there,' pioneering, pushing, and moving for Christ.

(Re-read Isaiah 43:18-19)

And so, "Go west, young man, go west young woman. 4Cs, you may be moving a bit south, but I want to ask of you: go west."

Amen.