

Marquand Chapel  
Monday, October 3, 2005

**At Home on the Frontier**  
Stewart Everett

A year and a half ago, in May of last year, I loaded up my car and left. From New Haven, Connecticut I drove ten hours to Sandusky, Ohio where I stopped for the night. From Sandusky, Ohio, I again drove ten hours the next day to Worthington, Minnesota. Stopped. From Worthington, Minnesota I trucked twelve hours to Billings, Montana. Stopped again. And from Billings I drove the last two hours to Bozeman-my destination. All within three days. Although I had been to Montana many times before, this occasion was different. It was new. I was driving 2000 miles across the country. Something that I had not done before. I was going to be working and living on a ranch outside of Bozeman for the entire summer. It was a land I knew well, but one I had not known alone-which I was. For years, Montana's ethos and rivers and mountains had cried out to me to come and take part. At least, for more than a week or two at a time. And so I went.

The Frontier. Many images come to mind: the 1800's, covered wagons, wooden houses made of sticks and brown logs surrounded by miles and miles of grassland, open and spacious, horses, hunting game for supper, backwards intellect, and church going folks. Television shows like *Bonanza* and *Little House on the Prairie* also feed into the common notions that we have about the Frontier. We indeed are familiar with the pictures of cowboys riding off into the sunset and how difficulties can be overcome with the support of family and a little patience. But the stories of the Frontier are more often filled with tales of tragedy. Fear and lawlessness. Murder. Looting. Heartache....Loss. After Lewis and Clark made their exploratory journey West, Americans began to seek refuge from their present lives in the lands beyond the Mississippi. Such refuge came at a high price. As American expansion moved further west, conflict between new settlers and the Native American tribes increased as they fought over the rights and privileges of land and human decency. As Kathleen Norris says in her book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, "The fact that one people's frontier is usually another's homeland has been mostly overlooked." The Frontier was often not a pretty place.

There are two main definitions of Frontier. The first is of the very kind that I have been speaking of here, defined as a "typically shifting or advancing zone or region especially in North America that marks the successive limits of settlement and civilization." The second definition regards Frontier simply as: "the farthestmost limits of knowledge or achievement." Frontier is that which is unknown to us, but yet that which we still seek.

This second meaning echoes in the words of the writer to the Hebrews in our passage for today. Here in chapter 11 we have the heroes in the "Faith Hall of Fame," or the legends of the faith frontier. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets are all listed among what the writer refers to in Chapter 12 as the "great cloud of witnesses." What a great

phrase. But Abraham is the one who stands out here. He is the one that “obeyed when he was called” to journey towards a place which God would give to him. A frontier that was foreign. A place that he did not know the where’s or the who’s or the why’s until he arrived there...in Caanan. Although Abraham might’ve been sure about the Who, the where’s and the why’s actually didn’t get much better for him and Sarah. They still had to live in tents once they arrived in Canaan. On top of that, and as verse 11 reminds us, Abraham and Sarah were told that they were to have a child in their old age. This child was destined to live much the same life as well as his child after him, for they were all heirs of the same promise. Now here’s where the first definition of frontier slides into the second. Abraham’s physical journey to unknown Canaan acquires the furthestmost limits of knowledge or achievement-in his case, the promises.

What is striking about this story in a nut-shell of Abraham comes to us in verse 13: “All of these died in faith WITHOUT having received the promises.” WITHOUT having received the promises. “But from a distance they saw and greeted them,” the writer to the Hebrews says. Abraham and his child Isaac and further descendents were open and accepting of God’s promise of a new land and a new people. And this was made possible through and by faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,” chapter 11 begins. “The conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.” By faith. The short phrase “by faith” is used 18 times in this chapter. Not only to speak of Abraham’s faith but to all the others in salvation history who responded to God’s voice when God said go. All the others who were strangers and foreigners, “seeking a homeland.” Abraham and Sarah’s lives were disrupted from all that they had known-family, customs, beliefs. I’m sure more than once Abraham thought to himself, “Should we go back?” Hebrews tells us that ultimately they did not, for they desired the “better country.” They desired God’s country-even though they had no idea of what it would look like. Indeed, Abraham is set up as an exemplary model of faith. He believed in the promise of God, the “city”, the homeland, even when he was unable to see it. He believed in the God who was calling him to the unknown lands of the frontier.

Of course, another young fellow was called by God to set out for an unknown place. The Gospel of Luke reports in chapter 4 that after Jesus is rejected in Nazareth, he leaves, saying that “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” He then travels to Capernaum, by lakeshores, other cities like Nain and Bethsaida, and up and down mountains to pray and eventually to Jerusalem. According to the Gospels, he never returns to Nazareth after leaving. No longer any place to permanently rest his head. Or have some security about where his next meal would be coming from. “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose,” Jesus says. As the Gospels move along in their narratives, we see that Jesus began to understand himself in another light-in terms of his death. Thus, death was to be new territory for him-anxiety driven to say the least. Christ’s death was new territory for God, for the faith of those mentioned among the “great cloud of witnesses” were all contributing to and surely a part of the salvation history, which culminated in Christ’s death on the cross. Never had God been such a part of the events in the world. Never before had the frontier held such a new meaning. Such a new hope.

The Frontier. The unknown. The scary. The exciting. The timid. The restlessness. The weak. The strong. The incarnate. The calling. Yes, the calling. For it seems that God's call to us and the Frontier go hand in hand. Even if we do not like to use the word "calling" or vocalize God's presence in such a way, at the very least, it is about a sense of doing what we know to be right, like Abraham, even if there is no logic behind it whatsoever. Hebrews 11:15 says that "If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return." That's logic. Do what you know. Be comfortable where you are. Go back. Seek for yourself first. That's logic. To seek unknown lands, lands totally out of our reach and range is definitely NOT the way to go.

But we know that not to be the case. And so I ask, "What is your frontier?" What unknown lands have you been prompted to seek? Is it a frontier of active social change, being in the line of fire, fighting for those who cannot fight for themselves? Is it stepping out to mend a broken relationship with a family member? Is it leaving a well paying job where all things were familiar and the money good to come to divinity school in order to serve the church or the academy? Is our frontier one in which we cannot name-as in the case of Abraham-but know that there is a reason? Some purpose? Some promise? Might our frontier be that of standing at the side of someone we love dearly who faces their own frontier? If anything is clear here in this passage of Hebrews, as well as the words of Jesus when he says to "Take up your cross and follow me," it's that we do not always know where God wants us to be or to go. And like Abraham, we may not know until we get there, wherever "there" may be. What is crucial to God is our faith to move towards frontier. To go. To take up the cross and follow. God requires movement. Inactivity doesn't fly.

Again, writer Kathleen Norris says in *Dakota* that "the high plains, the beginning of the desert West, often act as a crucible for those who inhabit them. Like Jacob's angel, the region requires that you wrestle with it before it bestows a blessing." Like the West, as Norris describes it, our frontiers are those that are to be "wrestled with." Decisions that we have to make in any given part of our lives are often very difficult. We have to think. We have to ponder. We have to doubt. As we strain to grapple with the person we are to be and with that in which we are to do. Like Abraham, we look at God's promises from afar and greet them, and make the choice, by faith, to step out towards the frontier. For hopefully, whatever the frontier may be, we will come to know it as a "bestowed blessing," as a place that "has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Amen.