

SERMON TITLE: "A Tour through History"
SERMON TEXT: Ephesians 4:1-6 and Galatians 5:1, 4-6, 13-14
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 2, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

This is a series of readings about United States and United Methodist history that fit in between hymns and scriptures.

1—Today we celebrate the 247th birthday of our nation. At the time the Declaration of Independence was signed, the American colonists were probably well-acquainted with Isaac Watts' hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." The God who had helped immigrants cross the Atlantic to the new world would surely help them in their fight for freedom. Perhaps this song gave them spiritual strength for the Revolutionary War that was to come. (O God, Our Help in Ages Past)

2—Up until 1784, there was no such thing as a Methodist *Church*. Methodist people were folks who belonged the Church of England, and who also attended Methodist class meetings and societies. But when the Revolutionary War broke out, most Church of England loyalists fled back across the ocean. This left Methodist people without a formal church. They had no ordained ministers who could serve communion or baptize. Consequently, John Wesley agreed that the Methodists in America should organize themselves into a denomination. All the Methodist preachers from all the colonies were invited. They came from cities and towns, fields and forests. On Christmas Eve, 1784—the birthday of Jesus—the Methodist Episcopal Church was born. Undoubtedly the Methodist preachers would have celebrated the occasion by singing a hymn written by their very own Charles Wesley, "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing!" (Hark! the Herald Angels Sing)

3—During the early 1800s, Americans were moving west into the Appalachians, to places like Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. They turned forests into fertile farms. Wherever pioneers moved, you could be sure that a Methodist preacher on horseback would find them. Francis Asbury, known as "the Bishop on Horseback," made sure that his Methodist circuit riders carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the farthest points of the frontier. The settlers in those distant places served as lay leaders, keeping the Christian faith and churches going in the months between visits from clergy. A highlight for the settlers was traveling to camp meetings in the forests, where they could sing hymns and hear enthusiastic preaching for days and weeks at a time. You didn't have to live on the frontier to pray for God's freedom and power, however. The lyrics to the song "America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)" were written by a Baptist theological student in Boston. The song's first public performance was at an Independence Day celebration in that city. [America (My Country 'Tis of Thee)]

4—Following the Louisiana Purchase and the development of the Oregon Trail, many more Americans headed their wagons west to make their life in the new land. In search of religious liberty, Mormons arrived in Utah in 1847. When gold was discovered in California in 1849, that westward push intensified. During the mid-century, conflicts with Native Americans intensified as land was taken, buffalo were slaughtered by the millions, and treaties were regularly made and broken by the U.S. government. The wonderful opportunity of the Homestead Act—160 acres of free land—was a curse that dehumanized and nearly wiped out the native peoples. To help us confess atrocities committed against the native peoples and remember their huge sacrifice, we will now do our best to sing "Jesus Loves Me" in the Cherokee language. (Jesus Loves Me, in Cherokee)

5—Of course, the conflicts in America weren't only between European Americans and Native Americans. Ever since the first Africans were brought to North America in 1619, the evil stain of slavery had shaped our nation. The economy of southern states became financially dependent on forced labor and the brutality that went along with it. Northerners were not entirely without fault in the institution of slavery, but were less tolerant of the practice, and frequently condemned those in the south of being unchristian in their slave-holding practices. Because these conflicts raged in the churches, Northern and Southern Baptists split, and Presbyterians split north and south. Among those called Methodist, there was a three-way split. In 1844, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, was formed. Because the remaining Methodist Episcopal Church of the north tried to walk the fence on slavery, a decisively-abolitionist group left in 1860 to form the Free Methodist Church. Meanwhile, slaves working in the fields had learned the biblical story of Moses, and they sang out in soulful tunes that it was time to let God's people go! (Go Down, Moses)

6—When the problem of slavery wasn't solved by church splits and legal decisions, our nation went to war in 1861. As Union and Confederate soldiers marched off to war, no doubt the intensity of bloodshed seemed like the day of God's wrath. (Battle Hymn of the Republic)

7—Once the Civil War came to an end, it was time to rebuild and reunite as much as possible. No doubt Christian people were inspired to unity by passages of scripture like Ephesians 4:1-6. (Read Ephesians 4:1-6)

8—Another post-Civil War act of unity was the connecting of the east and west with the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869. Now, there was one nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Since a lot of that railroad excitement happened here in Utah, it's not surprising that the first Methodist worship service in Ogden was conducted in the Union Depot in 1870, when a Methodist Episcopal preacher arrived by train. That initial worship service prompted the creation of what we know today as First United Methodist Church. Those years leading up to and just after the turn of the century were positive ones for America. In gleaming cities and across majestic mountain peaks, so much had been accomplished! By God's grace, it seemed that the American people could be as beautiful as her land. (America the Beautiful)

9—American progress toward that beautiful ideal was complicated by world events, however. In 1917, the U.S. President, Senate, and Congress determined it was in the best interests of our country to engage in combat against Germany and Austro-Hungary in what would become known as World War I. After fighting that "war to end all wars" in Europe, Americans returned home thinking of themselves as citizens of a world at peace, and Methodist people sang the ideal of unity in Christ. North, south, east, and west—we were all bound together throughout the whole wide earth. (In Christ There Is No East or West)

10—The Great Depression began in 1929. For the next decade, there was tremendous human misery in the U.S. and around the world. But, through President Roosevelt's New Deal programs, the nation was united in attempts to improve life for everyone. As people worked together in our society, unity became more possible in the churches as well. Enough time had passed since the Civil War that it was possible in 1939 for The Methodist Episcopal Church of the north, the Methodist Episcopal Church South, and the Methodist Protestant Church to reunite as simply "The Methodist Church." After all, they were an optimistic people united in their faith in God's love and power. (God of Love and God of Power)

11—Faith in God’s love and God’s power no doubt bolstered the spirits of young men and women who served their country in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. An ultimate loyalty to God’s love and power was an even stronger driving force for evangelistic and missionary efforts. Throughout the 1900s, United Methodists and other Christians were actively involved in starting new churches in our country and opening mission fields around the globe. (Go, Make of All Disciples)

12—In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren and The Methodist Church merged their ministries in the new United Methodist denomination. The Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials raised up in those United Methodist Sunday Schools and United Methodist Youth Fellowships would soon encounter people of Muslim beliefs in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, as the world entered a new phase of global conflicts. But, as always, the church continued to proclaim and sing the Christian longing for peace. (Let There Be Peace on Earth)

13—As we arrive at our current time in history, we Americans and United Methodists face on-going conflicts, challenges, and opportunities in our country, in the world, and in our denomination. Our situation makes me think of the third verse of the revival song “Just As I Am, Without One Plea.” It goes like this:

*Just as I am, though tossed about
with many a conflict, many a doubt,
fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

Individually, and as a collective people, we know the ideals of unity and peace and long for them. Yet we have many conflicts, doubts, and fears. God has much work to do with us yet. As we move forward in time, may we be willing to seek forgiveness at the altar of God’s mercy. May we continue to return to God’s word for guidance and hope. And may we continue to strive to enact God’s kingdom on earth, in relationships of justice and healing, in a society of truth and love, and in a land where all are free.

(Galatians 5:1, 4-6, 13-14)

(O God, We Thank You for This Land)