

"OUT OF THE PAST"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church
New York City, New York

"OUT OF THE PAST"

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock
I will build my Church, and the powers of death
shall not prevail against it."

(Matthew 16: 19)

INTRODUCTION

Somehow those words of Jesus regarding the durability and the persistence of the Christian Church across the ages have been in my thoughts as I have reflected on the one hundred and forty-five years of history that this Church has experienced. Indeed, our Church has endured and prevailed through all types of weather. I'd like to take a bit of time here this morning to review some of our history in order to help you appreciate more fully what it is that we shall be celebrating next Sunday.

Have you ever felt, as you sit quietly in here on a Sunday morning, that you wait where the past and the future meet? It's not that time stands still, but rather that there is a power in the human spirit to break through the barrier of time. Down the aisle you walk midst the countless footsteps of worshippers no longer seen. There is with you in the pew the presence of those who have loved this Church as you love it now. Voices now heard only beyond us sing silently with our own. The Board of Trustees, the Sunday School, the Adult Fellowship, the United Methodist Women, the ushers, the choir, the committees and the organizations - these, too, are only the present stage of the whole movement of faith, work and devotion which is the one stream of life of the Church from the day of its foundation.

THE BEGINNING

The first Methodist Church in America was erected on John Street in this city in 1768. When, in 1817, it was rebuilt, not all of the original timbers were used and our economical church fathers held fast to that which was good and durable. Years later, those timbers, hewn out of solid oak, were used in the construction of our church building. Today, our building has a supporting beam for the pulpit from one of these old timbers - a direct historical connection with the beginnings of Methodism in this country.

In the early 1830's, around the area from 83rd to 86th Streets as we know it, and between the East River and the "Railway" - now Park Avenue - a small residential village named Yorkville was growing up. Prior to the building of the railroad, the village had been connected to the city by stage coach. Methodist services were conducted in private homes in the village, with the official registration of our Church with the City and County of New York on March 10th, 1837. At that time Dr. Richard Seaman, the Minister, bought four lots of ground on 86th Street "near the railroad". The first Church building of wood was completed in August - it was moved from the Bowery to Yorkville - and shared the 4 lots with 2 houses and the parsonage. There were then 20 members and a debt of \$3,400.

I share with you a letter written by Rev. Daniel De Vinne regarding the origin of this Church. (See booklet)

The congregation grew slowly at the beginning, and by 1853 there were 100 members. Then began the decline in membership; the peak and valley effect evidence ever since. The following paragraphs are from some of the early records of our Church. Let me read them to you.

"The preachers in those days were poorly paid. The Conference gave to the Church for their support a missionary appropriation of \$200 per year and to the preacher, including house rent, was \$550, a portion of which was obtained by his own solicitations from other churches in the city... In addition to the salary a donation party was given annually at the parsonage, which, as a social gathering was always a success, but frequently failed in adding anything to the purse or the larder of the preacher. The pastor's wife frequently swept and cleaned the audience room; the lamps were trimmed by the pastor himself, or by some of the official brethren. There was a sexton, but he, like the rest of the Society, needed reconstruction."

"Yet, through all discomforts and discouragements, the pastor preached three times each Sabbath, exerted all of his influence by exhortation and personal appeal to bring into the fold those who had gone astray, and everywhere commended Yorkville as the brightest and best place to live in, and the Yorkville Church as the sure way to the only pleasanter place he knew of - heaven."

"The inconvenience and discomforts of worshippers on those days were numerous. The Church was lit by a half-dozen lamps swung from the ceiling, whose light fought a losing battle with the darkness. Seats were high-backed and uncushioned. The stoves, great devourers of wood but poor radiators of heat, encouraged the shivering audience with promise of warmth; and when the winter storms beat upon the exposed situation of the Church, the aged roof dropped streams of grief and the decaying frame groaned in agony of dissolution."

"The Trustees proposed to unite with the Harlem Church, while the stewards proposed union with the 50th Street Church".

SECOND AND THIRD BUILDINGS

By 1858 the first Church building needed to be replaced, and on January 30, 1859 we dedicated our second building, this time of brick, costing \$9,800 with a \$5,000 mortgage from the Bowery Savings Bank.

This 1862 excerpt could have been written today, or yesterday:

"In the Spring of each year there would be numbers admitted by transfer, but at the same time as many would remove by certificate. Yorkville seemed to be a way-station for migrating Methodists".

Our second Church building lasted slightly more than 25 years. From it went forth many young men to fight in the terrible Civil War in which our country was then engaged. In 1884, with membership in excess of 700 persons, the great Church, on the corner of 86th Street and Park Avenue, was built. The following is from a pastoral letter of November, 1904:

"Our beloved Church has still a glorious mission in this community. Never, I believe, in all its history has it been more thoroughly organized, or have more efficient leaders

the report of this morning's papers, and thank you very much."

"I am only one" I continued, "and an humble one at that, but you may count on me to stand with you on the front line of the firing line. Whenever you shoot your big gun down here in Mulberry Street, just listen and you will hear its echo in the crack of a little finebored pistol on the corner of Park Avenue and 86th Street, and that pistol will be in my hand and I will be shooting at the thing at which you aim".

He said enthusiastically, "You're the stuff! I am looking for you as much as you are looking for me", and, taking my hand warmly, he added, "I will stand with you in the fight till the end". Then he continued, "Do you know that you are the first man whose opinion I count of any value who has commented on my stand. You and your people are a credit to our great city".

FROM THE TWENTIES ON Growth and prosperity continued for our Church, which was strong up until the 1920's. Then with times of change upon the country, and the Church building in great disrepair, Dr. Peter Weyant, the pastor, led the congregation in erecting an apartment house on the corner and a smaller church building on 86th Street.

The architect for our present building was Henry C. Pelton, who also designed the Riverside Church for Harry Emerson Fosdick in the late twenties and early thirties. It's an adaptation of 11th and 12th century Romanesque of northern Italy and John Wesley's City Road Chapel in London. The front facade was largely inspired by the Church of San Abbondio at Como finished about the 12th century. The pulpit is designed after the 11th century stone pulpit in the Church of San Miniato at Florence. Some of you have seen it. I once was in that Church but it was before I came here as pastor. I'd love to go back to Florence and parts of Italy and see the originals of the Lectern (cathedral in Verona) and the pulpit in Florence. A week-long series of events culminated with the dedication of our present building on January 9th, 1927. According to a newspaper article of December 31st, 1926 (Evening Sun),

"This is the Church that has built a 15 story apartment house on 86th Street and Park Avenue, alongside of its new edifice and thus has made its financial future and prosperity safe and secure."

But, as many of you now know, it didn't quite work out that way. The depression years of the nineteen thirties followed too soon on the enormous financial commitment involved in the apartment house. The arrangements of the mid twenties did not fulfill the hopes and dreams of those who built it that, in time, it would pay for itself and help to undergird the church financially. The Membership began to fall off in the thirties and World War II saw a further decline. At this point, the Church had the dubious reputation "as the Methodist Church in America with the largest debt" - \$850,000.

In August of 1946, Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam appointed the Reverend Paul N. Otto as Pastor of the Church with the episcopal directive to close the Church within six months, channeling the few remaining parishioners to other congregations. He appealed for permission to try to bring the church back and with a

been at the head of the different departments of work. The debt which for so many years has handicapped us in our work is almost a thing of the past, and the financial condition of the Church was never better than now. Our present need is that every man, woman and child who is enrolled as a member of this Church shall be a live member, and by his sympathy, prayers and hearty cooperation seek to enlarge the work of the Kingdom of God in this community. Support as far as possible the work of all the organizations of the Church. Come to the services regularly, and make it a point always to greet strangers with a good, warm handshake. Keep your eye open for changes in residence in your vicinity, and be quick to invite newcomers to your Church if they shall have no relation. Let your pastor know about them too, that he may contact them early".

INTERESTING REFERENCE

From 1891 - 1895 (about ninety years ago), there was a pastor here by the name of Ferdinand Iglehart. He was author of a book entitled, "Theodore Roosevelt: The Man As I Knew Him". Dr. Iglehart makes reference to our Church in that book which I enjoyed reading and which I shall share with you. Apparently Theodore Roosevelt knew of this Church and its pastor.

"I have always counted as one of the highest honors, joys and blessings of my life the intimate personal friendship of Theodore Roosevelt for the last 24 years. As pastor of the Park Avenue Methodist Church in NYC, we were associated with him in his work as Police Commissioner in closing Sunday saloons and were engaged with him in the desperate fight against evil and crime in the great city."

Elsewhere Brother Iglehart writes:

"As pastor of the Park Avenue Methodist Church, I preached a sermon on that Sunday morning, asking the people of our Church and Methodists generally, and the ministers and members of all denominations, Protestant, Catholic and Hebrew, and the citizens who were members of no church but loved law and order, to stand behind Mr. Roosevelt in his effort to compel the law-defying and crime-breeding saloons to close on Sunday. Sure enough, some of the liquor dealers who had always been stronger than the law and authorities considered the threat a joke and kept open. And, of course, the Commissioner, strong in his intellect and of determined will, was in dead earnest and not joking and put 6,000 policeman on the job of detecting and arresting these lawbreakers. He scared the brewers, distillers and saloon-keepers, till they fairly shivered and their teeth chattered."

He continues on another page

"Our Church will stand by you. In my sermon yesterday morning I asked all good people to sustain you in this crusade."

The Commissioner said, "I saw what you said in your pulpit in

small group of 15 - 20 determined laymen he worked for ten years to prevent the Church from closing its doors. In response to urgent appeals, financial support was received from the United Methodist City Society, making our Church a "mission" Church of Methodism here in the city. It was during this period of ten years that a layman named Paul Russell and another named Harold Black put their lives in here and helped to make a difference.

Significant decisions were made involving real estate, church programs and I can remember in June of 1956 - seven months after I came as pastor - receiving the last check from the City Society to help us stay open. With our back against the walls, it was sink or swim. It's been a great adventure for many of us. Many names stand out some of them you know and recognize: Russell, Black, Else, Bush, Brown, Hoover, Robinson, Hull and so on down to the present leaders. We have seen a church rise from what had seemed certain extinction in the days following World War II to great heights, from a mission church to a church in mission - all in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ.

CLOSING So many devoted laymen and laywomen have over the years been a part of this Church and have given of their worldly goods for the glory of God. One such was Miss Jane Jones, born in Wales, housekeeper during her working life to Astors, Vanderbilts and Roosevelts. In 1897 she gave the Church a 5 story apartment building at 335 East 85th Street worth in 1897 \$25,000 plus. The building was later sold by the Church and the money used to pay some heavy debts of the Church. And a more recent gift was that of Annabella Johnston, born in Canada, who spent her working life as a nurse. An interesting sidelight is that she lived at 339 East 85th Street - a stone's throw from the home of Jane Jones at the end of the 19th century. I think of Annabella Johnston and Jane Jones whenever I walk that block on 85th Street between 2nd and 1st Avenue.

Next Sunday there will be an insert in the bulletin prepared by our Trustees which will draw your attention to our 150th Endowment Fund. You've heard about the past, but next Sunday you'll have opportunity to think about the future of this Church.

This history of a church is not simply a record of struggles to pay expenses, or to build buildings. The real history is that which cannot be so easily written, nor comprehended by the unsympathetic heart. History is made by the spirit that lives and loves, is plunged into the abyss of despair, rises to high hopes, and through all its tossing and struggle holds fast to God and operates in the Christ spirit and discharges the commission He gave us - "to go and serve in His name". It, above all other organizations, is here to give itself, to spend itself and its goods in the name of Christ. This is the history which this Church has written and which today and tomorrow we shall write, even the very least of us.

Let us write in the days to come as ably as our forbears have written it in their day. You have a Church - a great Church - of which to be deeply proud. Indeed, God has been good to us. To Him we give our thanks. To Him belongs the glory. Join us next Sunday for what will be a great day! A great celebration! honor..
praise.

PRAYER

We thank Thee, O God, for the Church that has met in various places through the ages, sometimes in great cathedrals and sometimes in catacombs and sometimes in fields and sometimes in store fronts.

Help us to recover in our own lives the thing that makes the church its real self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the living Christ into our homes, our offices, our schools - wherever we may be.

We are thankful, O God, for this Church which has continued the ministry of Jesus through the ~~ages and the~~ years and committed it to our care and trust. Imperfect though we be, help us to dedicate ourselves so completely to this ministry that we may go out into the city not to condemn it, but to save it, and to reclaim it for a life that is good and true and beautiful.

We ask this in the spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen