

Polson, Montana
100th Anniversary
September 27, 2009
Bishop Elaine J. W. Stanovsky

Hebrews 11, 12 excerpts

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. . . .³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible. 4 By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable* sacrifice than Cain's. . . .⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; . . .⁷By faith Noah, warned by God. . . built an ark to save his household. . . .

8 By faith Abraham. . . set out for a place. . . , not knowing where he was going. . . .¹¹By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren. . . .

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. . . .¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac . . .

²⁰By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. ²¹By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph. . . .

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth. . . . 29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea. . . . ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell. . . . ³¹By faith Rahab. . . did not perish. . . .

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured. . . . ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two,* they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised,⁴⁰ since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

First, thank you to Pastor Mark and Julie who have welcomed us so warmly, and hosted us for dinner last night with a few church members. And for Sherry and Fred who offered us their guest house overnight and fed us this morning. And for gift baskets. We have been well-cared for.

Well, here we are. In Polson, MT trying to imagine and remember what it was like 100 years ago, when Methodists moved to town to establish the first Protestant Church on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The church met in a tent while the building was built. The first pastor arrived in September of 1909. The parsonage was finished by the beginning of October. The cornerstone of the church building was laid by mid October and the church building finished and dedicated in July of 1910. Imagine, from first worship to dedicated building in 10 months. Churches today can take longer than that to pick the color of the new carpet.

Just a year later, in August of 1911 the whole Methodist Conference was held here. Each evening there were “Street Meetings.” Don’t you wonder what those were like? The newspaper reported that, “The street meetings which were held every evening at 7 p.m. drew large crowds. They were very interesting and no doubt there was good seed sown.”

Over the summer I was celebrating the arrival of Methodism in Colorado 150 years ago, to rough and tumble gold towns, where sermons were preached from whiskey barrels in gambling halls.

Church came to Polson in a little more civilized a time. The people who came to settle here when the Flathead Reservation opened to non-Indian ownership came from farms in Iowa and Kansas, they came to ranch and to farm, and to settle into the land and raise their children. And they did. Just over dinner last night I heard stories of people who have lived in this land for generations, some from the time it was Indian territory alone.

There was a certain urgency about life in a new community. What would be the civilizing influences. Where and how would community flourish among people who often lived in relative isolation a distance from town? Among those who came were

people who pursued not only a rich and prosperous living, but a community of care and generosity; a spiritual home.

The church knew that this young community would need a spiritual home. The District Superintendent, Rev. White, saw the need. The church bought property, sent a pastor, Rev. Twyford, soon followed by another Rev. White. People in the community pledged their support. A church took root to service this community and to open channels for this community to serve the world.

People of faith knew the urgent needs of people in these new communities.

We will never know the fullness of the struggles of their lives, the struggles of their faith, the trials and hardships they endured. We only receive the inheritance of their faith and their faithfulness.

12: ¹Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . .

The missionary movement of Methodists didn't stop 100 years ago. It continued into communities across this land and around the

world. It continues today. This church, founded by people on a frontier, is part of a world wide movement that continues to look to the horizons where the human family is shifting and moving, and developing new communities of faith and service.

Today, our United Methodist global Connection consists of nearly 14 Million professing and baptized members, . . . nearly 48,000 congregations, and more than 45,000 clergy. We are active on 5 continents. We have congregations in over 50 nations and mission personnel in 63 countries.

In this past 4 years, our members have given nearly \$25 Billion through offering plate collections. (Swenson 2008 GC)

I remember after 9-11, learning of all the ways United Methodist Churches on Manhattan in New York City were involved opening their doors as shelters, offering free community meals, ministering to emergency responders, going door to door in the city, checking to make certain that people were OK and had not withdrawn into isolation out of fear or sorrow. I remember thinking how grateful I was to be part of a connection that offered compassionate ministry on my behalf in that crisis. Those churches, those Christian brothers and sisters were there on behalf of our whole church in that crisis. Their ministry was supported by the whole church.

Your ministry matters to the whole church. You are part of a global network of ministries in the name of Jesus Christ, under the banner of The United Methodist Church.

So let me remind you of some of the ministries you participate in as part of the UMC.

- ❖ You know about UMCOR. How in natural disasters around the world the United Methodist Committee on Relief enables our churches around the world offer healing ministries. When I stopped by the depot the last time I was in Salt Lake City, a work team of 25 people from the Bozeman church was there, putting together flood buckets and birthing kits.
- ❖ The UMC relates to 122 colleges and universities that educate people from all backgrounds for all kinds of professions. Can you name some of these? Some are not so far away (Rocky Mountain College, University of Denver), others are farther away
 - Duke
 - Emory
 - Southern Methodist University
 - Boston University
 - The University of Puget Sound
 - Willamette

- Africa University
- ❖ We engage in campus ministry on many, many more campuses
- ❖ We support 13 United Methodist Seminaries that train clergy.
Can you name them?
 - Boston, Drew, Wesley
 - Duke, Candler, Gammon, Perkins
 - United, Methesco, Garrett, St. Paul
 - Iliff, Claremont
- ❖ We engage in mission and send Volunteer In Mission teams to projects around the world
- ❖ We publish Sunday School curriculum, and books and have bookstores
- ❖ We lobby congress about health care
- ❖ We sponsor summer camps for kids
- ❖ We run hospitals and nursing homes
- ❖ We take care of troubled kids
- ❖ BUT MOST OF ALL WE ARE FAMILY WITH
CHRISTIANS IN BERLIN AND MOSCOW, IN BURUNDI
AND CONGO AND KENYA, THROUGHOUT THE
PHILIPPINES.

You are part of all of it. This is your ministry. You represent the whole connection here. The whole church is counting on you.

In July I was in Salt Lake City at a gathering of Tongan United Methodists from across the western United States. Tongans, who came to America seeking economic and educational opportunity from an idyllic island kingdom in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. An island kingdom visited by English sailors, including Walter Buller, a Cornish Missionary who arrived in 1822 and converted the majority of Tongans to Methodism. We marveled at the journey of the Christian faith, from Palestine in the time of Jesus, to 18th century England and John and Charles Wesley, the founders of the Methodist movement, to an island Kingdom in the Pacific, and a frontier town in Montana.

Yesterday Su and I stopped at the United Methodist Women's annual meeting in Missoula before driving to Polson. There we enjoyed meeting -----, a missionary from Zimbabwe and Central Congo, who runs two small orphanages for children whose parents have died of AIDS or other disease, and have no social network.

Each place where people gather in the name of Jesus Christ to hear the gospel, to pray for healing, to minister to the needs of

people, is a mission frontier where the promise of abundant life meets the real needs of people.

Thank you for your faithfulness.

Thank God for the steadfast faithfulness of disciples of Jesus Christ who have followed God toward every horizon, and shared the faith along the way.

The value of a celebration like today's is to strengthen us for our ministry today and into the future.

We have received a rich inheritance, and it isn't about gold or timber or even the richness of the land. It is about the courageous, stubborn, visionary, shameless, generous faithful who heard the voice of God whisper,

- ❖ there is more to life than wealth
- ❖ Your sins are forgiven
- ❖ God has a purpose for your life
- ❖ Turn and live
- ❖ Love one another
- ❖ Share what you have

They carried the faith in their time, to this place. Now it is ours – both to receive and to share.

What is the mission frontier in Polson, MT in the year 2009? Life is no less harrowing and dangerous in 2009 than it was in 1909. What systems of opportunity and care are missing from this

community today and how can people of faith carry the promises of God; the good news of Jesus Christ to people who hunger and thirst?

The work is ours. Delivered by saints who have gone before. Ours to carry to the next town, a new generation, a new family, the lost sheep. New people move into every town with their particular mixture of hope and fear. Each one of us is living through an age and stage of life that is new and unknown to us, presenting challenges and uncertainties we have never faced before. This is the mission frontier. You are the missionaries. God is with us, leading us, beckoning the church to move into the church as boldly, as courageously, as nimbly as it moved into this community 100 years ago.

12 Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.