

Seeking God, Striking Gold

Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16

March 6, 2005

The California Gold Rush began when James Marshall discovered gold in Coloma on January 24, 1848. As news traveled across country, hundreds of pioneers planned to join the adventure of striking gold. Others came to California knowing that settlers would need more than gold to make their lives rich. These came bringing the gospel for those seeking God. These are our ancestors in the faith, and to their credit we are worshipping here today in the Lafayette United Methodist Church.

Today as we begin our sesquicentennial celebration, we're going to look at the contributions early Methodist pioneers made to The Golden State. They laid a solid foundation of discipleship which we have inherited.

In 1847 William Roberts arrived in San Francisco as the recently appointed Superintendent of the Oregon-California Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church. He organized the First Methodist Episcopal Church in San Francisco and then moved on to Oregon. When he returned to San Francisco in 1849 and learned of the discovery of gold, he headed to the goldfields to preach. On April 22, 1849, Mr. Roberts organized a Methodist Church in Coloma, the first Protestant church in the mines of California. Methodists were pioneers in ministry in California.

One pastor of the Coloma church, A.J. Nelson, spent one night on a hill overlooking the mill, talking to a young school teacher of the community who worshiped in his church. Throughout the night they talked about the values of life and existence. The young teacher was Edwin Markham. Of these conversations with his pastor, he wrote, "I felt I had discovered...gold in those beautiful Coloma hills." Markham became known for his poetry, which combined his mystic beliefs and his interest in the difficulties of working poor people. The poem that made him famous, "The Man with a Hoe," certainly reflected John Wesley's concern for the poor and social justice. We might wonder what influence that early Methodist preacher had on a young man who became an important voice in American poetry. Some discovered gold; others discovered God.

In 1847 Methodists organized the first Sunday school in California. Today United Methodists continue to influence youth and young adults, both awakening a spiritual connection to God and planting a social conscience that sees beyond ourselves to the world as our field of ministry.

Bishop Beverly Waugh appointed Isaac Owen and William Taylor to be the first missionaries to California. Owen advertised in the *Methodist*

Christian Advocate of Cincinnati, on February 7, 1849, for members of a wagon train bound for California from St. Joseph, Missouri. The ad stated that “Good moral character will be required of all wishing to join the company, with satisfactory assurances that the Sabbath will be observed when practicable.”

Owen’s first pulpit in California was in Grass Valley on September 22, 1849. He was an outdoor preacher, so he was comfortable in the mining camps and camp meetings of the western frontier. Owen was appointed to the Sacramento area. Upon his arrival he found a “prefab” church. William Taylor’s congregation in Baltimore had built a chapel, dismantled it and shipped it “around the Horn” to become Taylor’s church in San Francisco. But when it arrived in San Francisco a church was already under construction. Consequently, the “Baltimore Chapel” was sent on to become the first church building to be erected in the entire Sacramento-San Joaquin Valley. Methodists brought prefabricated buildings to California!

As good stewards, the Sacramento Methodists offered hospitality to the Jewish congregation on Saturdays for their worship. When the chapel was no longer of service to the Methodists, it was sold to the Jewish congregation, becoming the first synagogue west of the Rocky Mountains. Methodists have often taken the lead in building interfaith relationships, as witnessed by this act over 150 years ago.

William Taylor took to the streets of San Francisco on December 3rd, 1849, beginning seven years of street preaching in the city then known as Yerba Buena. A primary focus of his ministry was The Plaza, a market place or public gathering place where the law was dispensed, criminals hanged or thrashed, and society promenaded on holidays and for the ceremonies of the church and public life.

When the first great fire hit San Francisco, he seized the opportunity to minister to people who had lost all their earthly possessions and to those who had lost loved ones. He addressed the questions people had about God and divine judgment and preached encouragement and hope to the suffering masses. It is said that in his seven years in California he probably did more for social betterment than any other San Francisco Argonaut.

A few years later he was appointed to establish a church for seamen. He built a church valued at \$34,000, mortgaged on his name, “Father Taylor.” He was so passionate about spreading the gospel that he put his reputation on the line. Unfortunately a fire destroyed the church and parsonage within an hour. He wrote books and returned to the east coast to work and pay off his enormous debt. He became a missionary to the world, traveling to India, South America, Africa, and Australia, preaching eight to

twelve sermons a week, always in great demand. Following the call of Christ, these early pioneers made great sacrifices on behalf of the gospel.

In Australia Taylor saw eucalyptus trees for the first time and sent seed to his wife in California in 1863. They thrived so well that a neighbor horticulturalist asked Taylor to send him a pound of seed. Thus Methodists brought eucalyptus trees to California!

Early on Owen and Taylor had great dreams for the church in California, including a book store, academies, and a university. Together these two ambitious men built the first book room west of the Rockies. Because wages for secular workmen were so high (\$12 a day), the two preachers worked with their hands to dig the foundation for the book store adjoining the Powell Street church. Within a year Owen collected funds to send two thousand dollars' worth of books by ship, arriving in January, 1850. A bronze marker on the building at 83-85 McAllister Street announces that this was the first bookstore in California. Methodists brought bookstores to California!

William Taylor led in forming an Academy in Napa. Isaac Owen led in the establishment of the California Wesleyan College at Santa Clara in 1851. Later this became the College of the Pacific in San Jose, and then the University of the Pacific in Stockton. It was the first chartered institution of higher education on the Pacific Coast. Southern Methodists established Pacific Methodist College in Vacaville in 1859, which had a forty-year history. Methodists pioneered higher education in California!

Likewise the University of California owes its origin largely to a group of Protestant clergymen, including Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Methodists. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Oscar Fitzgerald, was a Methodist minister, who assisted the organizational process in the legislature to establish the University of California in 1868. During his term in state office, Fitzgerald also accomplished several major tasks for education in California, including removing tuition charges for public schools; standardizing textbooks throughout the state; raising taxes for school support; and introducing a minimum school term of eight months. Methodists have been strong advocates of public education in California!

While others were striking it rich with gold, these men of God were out stumping for God. Methodist preachers gave the widest coverage to the Gold Rush miners of any religious group. We often hear of the Methodist Circuit Riders, riding horses from church to church to preach and serve the sacraments. In those days hay cost \$60 to \$100 a ton and was too expensive for a minister to buy to feed his horse or even a mule! Consequently, in California, many were circuit walkers. And yet these men were passionate

about spreading the good news. In his journal one wrote, “Such labor in a brief period will superinduce premature age. And yet the itinerant system alone will carry the gospel to the people who are in frontier conditions. Better wear out than rust out.”

Martin Miller was the first pastor in Fresno County, establishing six congregations. His son George later became Bishop George A. Miller and served this congregation. Bishop Miller fondly remembered visits by the presiding elder (now called District Superintendent). As a young boy he always planned to have studying on the occasion of his visits to give him an excuse to sit up late and listen to his father and the elder discuss the Bible, church events, and theology. In 1916 George Miller and his family were commissioned for missionary work in Central America. In 1943 he came as a guest preacher to Lafayette when the pastor was called to war. Bishop Miller was invited to stay and was the appointed pastor from 1943 through 1948.

From its beginnings California has been a state of ethnic diversity. Early Methodists in California provided spiritual homes for Germans, Scandinavians, Italians, Portuguese, Latin Americans, Filipinos, Chinese, and Japanese. John Vieira, Jr., father of Gilbert Vieira, one of this church’s former pastors (1982-1990), served the Portuguese community in Oakland. As part of its mission and ministry, Methodists have assisted immigrants and refugees in entering the culture of American life and offered opportunities to preserve their cultural heritage.

The Lafayette United Methodist Church, originally named the Lafayette Community Church, is the oldest church in central Contra Costa County. In the summer of 1847 Elam Brown, the Father of Lafayette, purchased “Rancho Acalanes” for nine hundred dollars and three hundred head of cattle. Elam Brown was a member of the Convention that framed the State Constitution at Monterey in 1849. Sunday school classes were held in the Brown’s home before a church building was built at Golden Gate Way and Second Street in 1855. We’ll hear more about this congregation’s history through the year.

Today we celebrate the ancestors of our faith, from Abraham and Sarah, to John and Charles Wesley, to William and Isabella Taylor, to Elam and Margaret Brown. We are blessed to inherit the ministry of Jesus Christ, which they so lovingly nurtured throughout time. Now ours is the time to reach out to those who are seeking God and offer them something greater than gold, the gift of faith. May we inherit the spirit of adventure, the willingness to risk, the commitment and the faith of our ancestors that we might continue to spread the great treasure entrusted to our care. Amen.

Sermon information was obtained from the following resources:

Engle, Irvin A. *Men Who Dug for God and Men Who Preached for God*.
Published by the Commission on Archives and History, California-Nevada Conference,
United Methodist Church, 1973.

Stanley, Laura. *A History of the Lafayette United Methodist Church*.

Loofbourow, Leon L. *Cross in the Sunset: The Story of Methodism in
California-Nevada*, Volume I. Published by the Historical Society of the California-
Nevada Annual Conference of The Methodist Church, 1966.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church