Forging the Frontier: Methodist Circuit Riders
Acts 14:21-28
October 4, 2009

Good Morning. My name is Conrad Best. I celebrated my 210th birthday last week; I was born on October 1, 1799 in Pennsylvania. You might say that I grew up with this young country and lived through its westward expansion. I'm here today because I'm a member of the Methodist version of the Pony Express. Just as the Pony Express speeded the delivery of mail across the western United States, the Methodist Circuit Riders delivered the good news of God's love across the prairies, plains and mountains.

I am here today at the invitation of your pastor, who is my great-great-great granddaughter. Two hundred years ago women weren't known to be riding the circuits as preachers, but women did show some leadership in the class meetings and society gatherings. I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find her in a Methodist pulpit, because preaching did run in the family. My uncle Joseph was a Methodist circuit rider, as were my four brothers, Jacob, Charles, Peter, and Joseph Best.

I was married at the age of 32 to Susan Krutzer in Clinton County, Pennsylvania. She was 19 at the time. Susan and I had eleven children, seven of them born in Pennsylvania. In 1847 we moved to Freeport, Illinois, where we had four more children. I lived to the ripe old age of 86.[i]

We circuit riders took after our founder, John Wesley. He took his ministry from city to city, just like the apostle Paul. Wesley is famous for saying, "The world is my parish." In the first 60 years of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, the denomination grew from 15,000 members to well over a million, with 4,000 circuit riders and more than 7,000 local preachers.

We were methodical in our evangelistic efforts. We followed the pioneers westward. One preacher by the name of Nolley was in a remote section of Mississippi when he noticed some fresh wagon tracks. He followed the tracks until they ended in a clearing where a settler had just begun to unload his wagon. Nolley introduced himself to the family, but when the settler found out who the visitor was, he expressed the greatest disgust, exclaiming, "Another Methodist preacher! I left Virginia for Georgia to get clear of them. There they got my wife and daughter. So I come here, and here is one before I can get my wagon unloaded!" "My friend," replied Nolley, "if you go to Heaven you'll find Methodist preachers there; if you go to Hell I'm afraid you'll find some there; and you see how it is on earth, so you had better make terms with us and be at peace."[ii]

With the founding of a new settlement, a layperson would invite his neighbors to his cabin for religious services. A religious "society" would form and be brought under the "wing of a circuit rider." There were not enough preachers to

keep up with the westward expansion of the country. We depended upon laypeople in the communities to tend the flames of faith in our absence. A circuit rider would usually have more than two dozen preaching stations. It might take as long as a month or more to make the rounds of all our assignments. Only the circuit riders were ordained to offer the sacraments of baptism and communion. That's why it is fitting that I've arrived on communion Sunday. Then at least every two years we would be assigned by the bishop to a different circuit.

Our days were filled with endless travel. In a typical day, I would rise at four in the morning. It was not only the distance that took travel time; it was also the rugged terrain that slowed our travel. One of my colleagues in Louisiana wrote, "Every day I travel I have to swim through creeks or swamps, and I am wet from head to feet, and some days from morning to night I am dripping with water. My horse's legs are now skinned and rough to his hock joints, and I have rheumatism in all my joints…But none of these things shall move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy."[iii] We were so passionate about the grand task of carrying the message of God's word that nothing could stop us.

It was a rough life. Nearly half of the circuit riders died before they were thirty years old. About two thirds of my colleagues died before they had spent 12 years in the ministry. I was one of the rare ones. I rode the circuit for about 14 years before I was married. Once married, I continued riding circuits in Pennsylvania for 15 years. After our seventh child was born, Susan insisted that I spend more time at home. I spoke with the Bishop about my family needs. I was located in the town of Freeport, Illinois. I lived there serving the local church and the surrounding area the rest of my life.[iv]

The salary of a circuit rider was pretty meager. Some preachers sold their boots to feed their families. Others parted with precious wool top coats to pay for the shoeing of a lame horse. Henry Bascom, a well-known West Virginian itinerant, traveled more than three thousand miles and preached to more than four hundred congregations during one particular year. For that service he received twelve dollars and ten cents. In addition to sheer poverty, the circuit riders were often placed in the worst accommodations. Yet no matter how crowded, smelly, filthy, or insect-and-disease-ridden the cabins, a circuit rider was bound by the very nature of his calling to accept his lodgings without complaint.

Another relative of your pastor's and mine wrote about the visit of the circuit rider to her home. "A circuit rider came once or twice a year, rode a horse and carried a little bag with a change of clothes. When he got dirty some woman on his circuit would wash his clothes and get him clean again. Mother usually gave him some of Father's clothes to wear while he had his clothes in the wash. He had a bath in our wash tub in the kitchen and would put on one set of clean clothes and

had another set to leave with. He usually stayed at our house. That was considered the Preacher's Hotel - don't know why no one else ever had him. We were crowded - had to pile up in one bed to have a place for him to sleep and it was all in the same bedroom.

"Mother really did cook up a storm when the Preacher came. She was a good cook. Lots of good pork and cobblers, goose berries, chicken and sometimes she would clean a big old goose and have dressing and gravy. We all loved that. Lots of jam and jelly from the wild plums, choke cherries and rhubarb jam and all kinds of pickles. We never knew what it was to want for food but we had very little fruit. It was a real treat when Father would buy gallon sized cans of dried fruit.

"The preacher held meetings at the school house, it was always packed. Our folks and all of the kids went too. All liked to go but Floyd, he was too mischievous and naughty and had to be taken out and his seat warmed up real often. Father was very strict. The Preacher would stay for a week at a time, then ride on for ten or twenty miles and be at another school house. He was a Methodist.

"Then one day a new [circuit rider] came, drove a team and buggy, had his wife and two babies. They also stayed at our house. When they left the folks gave them some chickens and some sacks of grain. They had no money. That was our offering. We would give them potatoes and anything else we happened to have when they were there. They would sell the chickens or anything they could for some money. Again, we had the bed problem but always managed to get by, but everyone was glad to have Church. The Preacher and his wife would visit around the neighborhood during the day and stay with us over night. Sometimes his wife would wash their clothes. She never had enough diapers. One time Mother gave her some new flour sacks all bleached nice and she used them for diapers. We had an old fashioned wood stove and it was hot. She spread her wet diapers on the chairs to dry. They did - but the aroma, oh my! From then on I thought all Preacher's babies smelled like wet diapers. Took some doing to get me to think otherwise."[v]

The greatest reward was seeing churches spring up across the land. Jess Walker, a circuit rider of the early nineteenth century, entered St. Louis in 1818 with the words, "I have come in the name of Christ to take Saint Louis, and by the grace of God I will do it." God was with him in his efforts, for within a year he had a church of sixty members and a free school for poor children. This same man introduced Methodism to a tiny settlement perched precariously on the south shore of Lake Michigan in 1830; the cluster of cabins later became known by a universally recognized name—Chicago.[vi]

So why pull me out of the history books today? Your congregation is reliving the Pony Express in the coming weeks just as our country prepares to celebrate the sesquicentennial of the Pony Express next year. You'll be delivering the mail to one another along with your pledge of giving for year 2010. Remember that the mail delivery represents the sharing of the good news of God's love throughout this community, state, nation, and world. You and I have experienced how meaningful is the knowledge of God's love in our lives. We yearn for others to experience that love as we know it through Jesus Christ. We circuit riders gave our all that the message of God's love might sustain the pioneers as they forged their way across the American frontier. I hope you'll continue our efforts of spreading God's love each in your own way.

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[i] Best Family History, compiled by Walt and Rae Best.
[ii] Richard Rupp and Mark Minnick, "Has He a Horse? The Saga of the Circuit Riders," http://www.faithofourfathers.org/heritage/horse.html, retrieved August 2009.
[iii] Ibid.
[iv] This is an assumption about Conrad Best; specifics are not known beyond the fact that he settled in Freeport Illinois supposedly in 1847.
[v] Lola Corene Baysinger, *The Baysinger Family History*, 1979, pp. 97-98. Thanks to my aunt, Cleo Best Delaney, for sharing this from her extensive genealogical research.
[vi] Ibid., Rupp & Minnick.

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