



Surrounded!
**“TRAILBLAZIN’ BISHOP:
FRANCIS ASBURY”**

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Our “witness” today is none other than Francis Asbury, the great organizer and driving force of the early Methodist Church. A man who, in the estimation of historians, did as much as any other in shaping our nation.

Before his birth in Great Barr, England, Francis Asbury’s mother said she had received a vision from God foretelling that her child would be a boy and that he was destined to be a great religious leader who would spread the Gospel among the heathens. As soon as he was old enough to understand, she read the Bible to him for an hour each day. At 12 years old he asked of his mother *who, where, and what* were *Methodists*. She directed him to a person who took him to hear them. Asbury wrote:

I soon found out this was not the Church of England but it was better, the people were so devout. The preacher had no prayer book, yet he prayed wonderfully. What was yet more extraordinary, he took his text and had no sermon book. I thought this is wonderful indeed! It is a strange way, but the best way.

He took up Methodism at the age of thirteen and, at the age of eighteen, he became a local preacher and, three years later, was received by John Wesley himself into the itinerant Methodist Ministry and was admitted into the British Conference in 1768.

Asbury was in attendance at the Bristol Conference in 1771 when John Wesley, in his Conference address, said, "Our brethren in America call aloud for help. Who are willing to go over and help them?" Young Francis Asbury arose and said: "Here I am, send me!"

When he came to Bristol, Asbury had not one penny, but God opened the hearts of friends who supplied him with clothes and ten pounds. He said, "I found by experience that the Lord will provide for those who trust him." In September 1771, eight days out to sea on his voyage to America, Asbury wrote: "Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No; I am going to live to God and to bring others to do so!"

Having spelled out his purpose, he never deviated from it. So began the remarkable career of a man who established the Methodists on this continent and effectively shaped the church which has endured and prospered for well over two centuries. From that one ardent decision by Asbury to be sent to America, truly our young nation was changed – and for the good.

The life of Francis Asbury deserves to be known and remembered by us all. He was far more important to the creation of the Methodist Church in America than was John Wesley. Indeed, without Asbury, it's highly unlikely that there would be Methodist churches in America at all. Given that introduction, let me ask you a few questions:

First, how many here today know anything about Francis Asbury apart from his name? Raise your hand if you do. Asbury's name lives on, in condensed form, in the name of our United Methodist publishing house, which is called Cokesbury. That name is a contraction of the names of the first two Methodist Superintendents: Thomas Coke and Francis Asbury. Hence, *Cokesbury*.

But in his day, Francis Asbury was the best known person in all America. President Calvin Coolidge, who was himself a scholar and historian, said that Francis Asbury deserved to be "ranked among the founding fathers of our nation, for he more than any other one individual molded the American character." He was recognized on sight by more people in the United States than was his contemporary, President George Washington. That was because Asbury traveled throughout the entire republic, staying in the homes of different people every night. He traveled tirelessly up and down the Atlantic seaboard and as far west as there were settlers, visiting every community, outpost and fort, in areas George Washington was never seen. Landlords and tavern keepers knew him by sight in every region and people called out his name as he passed by.

It was said of Asbury that he had less privacy than anyone in America. He wrote in his journal:

The people it must be confessed are amongst the kindest in the world, but kindness will not make a crowded log cabin twelve feet by ten agreeable for six

adults and as many children, where there is no room to retire to, and much loved solitude is not to be found, unless you choose to run out into the woods!

And the hardships were real:

I found amongst my other trials I have taken the itch; and considering the filthy houses and filthy beds I have met with coming from the Kentucky Conference it is perhaps strange that I have not caught it twenty times. I do not see that there is any security against it but by sleeping in a brimstone shirt.

Asbury wrote of having to “lay along the floor on a few deer skins with the fleas.” Sickness plagued him. He half-killed himself with overwork and exposure, often sleeping outside without shelter, unable to stay long enough to get really well. Often he was so weak he had to be lifted onto his horse and *tied* to the saddle. But his passion to serve God was unflinching. Of this he said:

O, what would one *not* do, what would he *not* suffer, to be useful to souls, and to the will of his great Master!

We may not know him well today, but in his time Asbury was legendary.

A second question: is there anyone who knew that Francis Asbury is known as Methodism’s first Circuit Rider? A “circuit rider” was a preacher, riding a horse, who had an assigned circuit of churches. The typical preacher rode a circuit 200 to 600 miles in circumference, with 25 to 30 preaching sites per round. One day they might preach in a barn, the next in a house, and the next at a crossroads. They could even use the same sermon until they looped back around to begin again. A lazy preacher 200 years ago needed less than a dozen sermons a year, one for each time around the circuit, but Methodist preachers typically were not lazy.

Asbury’s circuit was larger yet: he visited every Methodist preacher in America every year. Historians say he rode on horseback farther than any man in American history, averaging 6,000 miles a year or some 265,000 miles in 44 years of his ministry. He road over a quarter million miles on unexceptional horses to have money to give to the poor. He was often inadequately clothed because he gave away coat or shirt to anyone needier than himself. His schedule was so tight that he slept only six hours a night lest he be late to an appointment. Because of his great travels, Asbury became known as “The prophet of the long road.”

In riding the dangerous roads and trails of early America, Asbury set an example for all who desired to proclaim the Gospel in that day. He wrote in his journal on November 20, 1771:

My brothers seem unwilling to leave the cities, but I think I will show them the way!

And show them he did. As soon as he was assigned to New York, he pushed his horse twenty miles out of the city to preach at Westchester. Visiting other villages, he formed a “preaching

circuit.” Such circuits would form the backbone of American Methodism. He instructed his preachers:

Go into every kitchen and shop; address all, aged and young, on the salvation of their souls.

In addition to zeal, organization was Asbury’s gift. He created “districts” of churches, each of which would be served by circuit rider-preachers. When he was assigned to Maryland, Asbury tripled its circuits and doubled its membership in just one year. Rain or shine, heat or cold, he was in the saddle. While riding, this school drop-out read, sang hymns, taught himself Greek and Hebrew, fasted and prayed. Along his way, he preached to any audience he could find, despite threats, fines and illness.

Asbury gave away nearly all the money that came his way, often to people he met on the road. Once, in Ohio, he came across a widow whose only cow was about to be sold for debt. Declaring, “It must not be!” he gave her what he had and solicited enough money from bystanders, including some who had come to bid on the cow, to pay the woman’s bills.

In the late 1700s, 95% of Americans lived in places with fewer than 2,500 inhabitants, and thus most did not have access to church or clergy. Asbury sent his preachers out after the people and the itinerant system was perfectly balanced to keep pace with a rapidly expanding frontier. It was often said that in the wilderness the only thing stirring – even in the worst weather – were the crows and Methodist preachers. Asbury pushed for missionary expansion into the frontier, even though his preachers’ lives were constantly threatened by illness, exposure and Indian attacks. Of one trip, he wrote:

The water froze as it ran from the horse’s nostrils. I have suffered by lodging in open houses in this cold weather; but this is a very small thing when compared to what the dear Redeemer suffered for the salvation of precious souls.

Oftentimes, in the wilderness, the first human contact settlers would have would be with the Methodist preacher. One rough man, having been found by a Methodist preacher in the far reaches of Kentucky said:

I came out here to get away from you Methodists. Now I see that it is impossible to escape you, so I might as well join you!

Under Asbury, Methodism became a burning fire that spread across the wilderness as fast as people entered it.

Let me ask a third question: who among us know that Asbury was the first Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, despite the objections of John Wesley? After the Revolutionary war, John Wesley ordained Englishman Thomas Coke as his American superintendent. Coke, in turn, ordained Asbury at the famous Baltimore “Christmas Conference” of 1784, which gave birth to the Methodist Episcopal Church. On Christmas Day, Asbury was ordained a deacon, the following day, an elder, and on December 27, was commissioned as a

General Superintendent. Or, as Asbury identified himself, as a Bishop. As Coke put it, “We were in great haste and did much business in a little time.”

And from that time, Asbury held the reins of American Methodism. He kept his circuit riding preachers unrelentingly occupied. He never married – and Asbury did not want his preachers to marry. He was quoted as saying, “The marriage bed is the death of a good preacher!” Why was that? Because it was a rough life out on the circuit, traveling from village to village, often sleeping outdoors or in primitive cabins. So if a preacher married, what did he want to do? He wanted to stay in one spot with his wife and family. He did not desire to itinerate any longer – if he did, he would never see his wife. Now you know why Methodist preachers used to be moved every year and still are moved, periodically, by those wicked Bishops. Francis Asbury started it. And truth be told, the method has served the church well.

Finally, who would have guessed that this uneducated, but brilliant, circuit rider also had shrewd political instincts? When the Revolution broke out, Thomas Rankin, Asbury’s supervisor, howled at Americans for their “wicked revolt” against England. But Asbury kept silent. He foresaw that America would win the war.

During that war Asbury was the only Methodist preacher who remained in the colonies; the rest returned to England. Once, Asbury was imprisoned on suspicion of loyalty to England, but was fined five pounds, released and permitted to resume his ministry. During the war, a patriot shot at him and the bullet passed through his hat. Another time he had to hide in a swamp for two days to elude an unfriendly patrol. You see, Asbury refused to swear Maryland’s oath of allegiance, believing all oaths were forbidden in scripture.

But Asbury’s sympathy for the American cause during the war allowed him to pick up the pieces afterwards. He prompted the Methodists to congratulate Washington on winning the presidency. He and Thomas Coke made a formal visit to the Capitol, in New York City, to greet and congratulate President Washington on his inauguration. They were the first church to do so. Washington’s response made the news and the Methodists won approval.

On May 26, 1783, Bishops Asbury and Coke traveled to Mount Vernon to call on General Washington. They were well received by the General who responded favorably to the business they brought: proposing legislation for the abolition of slavery in Virginia.

And you should know this: Like Wesley, Asbury hated and ardently opposed slavery and preached against it. After preaching at one church which did not allow black people inside, he declared:

It was not at all agreeable to me to see nearly a hundred slaves standing outside, and peeping in at the door, whilst the house was half empty: they were not worthy to come in because they were black! Farewell, farewell to that house for ever!

Asbury refused to preach in that church again. He eventually implemented a policy that would suspend any minister for not emancipating his slaves in a state where such action was permitted.

In 1815, near Christmas, Asbury headed toward Baltimore to attend the General Conference which was to meet in May. He became very ill with influenza which resulted in pulmonary consumption. A doctor was sought, but none could be found. As his condition grew worse he asked his friend, Rev. John Bond, to read the 21st chapter of Revelations, sing some old hymns and pray. He died March 31, 1816 at the age of 71.

“The prophet of the long road” had died as he had lived, by the side of the road he had traveled. He had crossed the Allegheny Mountains 60 times, preached 17,000 sermons, ordained over 4,000 ministers and presided at 224 conferences. There were between 300 and 600 Methodists in the colonies when he arrived. When he died there were more than 214,000. His motto, paraphrased, was “Work as if your salvation depended upon it, but trust Christ as if you need not work at all.”

Francis Asbury never had a home or set boarding place. He never owned any property. He had no address save America and the Methodist Church wherever it was found. His salary was never more than \$85 a year, which he gave away. He had no love apart from Jesus Christ and the children of God. How we need more people like him, who are willing to stand up and say “Here I am! Send me!” We may not be “prophets of the long road” as was Asbury, but can we not be faithful followers of Christ on whatever road is ours?

May we pray? Lord God, give us discernment to hear you when you ask, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” Give us hearts willing to endure anything in order to serve you. Help us, with no reluctance, to say, “Here I am, Lord! Send me!”