

“Remembering the Past: Moses and Thomas Campbell”
The First in the Series “Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future”
Exodus 3:1-10

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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The season of Epiphany is a time when the Church celebrates the revelation of God made flesh in Jesus the Christ. The Greek word *epiphaneia* literally means “to show forth, to appear.” Thus, the primary English definition of the word epiphany is, “an appearance or manifestation, especially of a deity.” This morning, I’d like for us to also ponder a secondary English definition of the word epiphany. This secondary definition is, “a sudden, intuitive perception of, or insight into, the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple or commonplace occurrence or experience.”¹ Or put more simply, an epiphany in this sense is an “ah ha!” moment.

Both definitions of epiphany are helpful as we reflect on today’s scripture lesson, Moses and the Burning Bush, for not only did God appear to Moses in the burning bush; that divine manifestation evoked in Moses an “ah ha!” moment.

I think it is interesting to note that Moses was going about his normal daily activities, shepherding his father-in-law’s sheep, when the burning bush caught his attention. Often it is just like that for us, too: we are going about our daily activities—working, going to school, enjoying a gathering with family or friends, or walking through the woods—and suddenly our attention is captured by something out of the ordinary, and that experience becomes revelatory. If we are open to the Spirit of God, as Moses was, God will reveal Godself *to* us and the divine will *for* us—and often when it’s least expected.

In this Epiphany sermon series, we will be reflecting on the lives not only of certain biblical characters but also of certain historical figures in the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in general and Oakland Christian Church in particular, focusing on their “ah ha!” moments. We will be *remembering the past* in preparation for *envisioning the future*. Let’s begin our Epiphany journey.

Thomas Campbell was born on February 1, 1763, in County Down, Ireland, to Archibald Campbell and Alice McNally. His father was born into the Catholic Church, but had converted to the Church of England because of the English Parliament’s law prohibiting the practice of Catholicism within the realm. Thus, Thomas’ early spiritual life was nurtured within the Church of England.

Thomas was an unusually bright boy, so it seemed natural for him, when he turned 18, to become a school teacher. While teaching school near the village of Sheepbridge, Ireland, the young man came to the attention of John Kinley, a member of the Secessionist Church. (The Secessionist Church was composed of Protestants who rebelled against the established Church

of England. In Ireland and Scotland, the Secessionist Church became known as the Presbyterian Church.) John Kinley was so impressed with Thomas' intellectual abilities that he offered to pay for the young man to receive an advanced education at the University of Glasgow, Scotland—*provided* he would also receive ministerial training at Whitburn Seminary, a Scottish Presbyterian school. Thomas' father was not happy about the condition for the financial support, but he would not stand in the way of this marvelous opportunity for his son to study at such a prestigious university.

Now, I need to say a little about these two schools so you will appreciate their influence on the young Campbell. The University of Glasgow was the center of 18th Century Scottish Enlightenment Thought, which meant that Thomas was influenced by such brilliant Scottish thinkers as David Hume, Adam Smith, Robert Burns, Thomas Reid and others who stressed the importance of human reason, and rejected any authority that could not be justified by reason.

Whitburn Seminary, where Campbell studied after graduating from the University of Glasgow, was part of the Anti-Burgher branch of the Presbyterian Church. Let me unpack that ecclesiastical jargon. After the Protestant Reformation in Scotland under the leadership of John Knox, Scottish Protestants split into the Scottish Episcopal Church, which was essentially the Church of England, and the Church of Scotland, which was Presbyterian (that is, elder-run) rather than Episcopalian (that is, bishop-run) in governmental structure. The Church of Scotland soon split over the issue of who had the authority to ordain ministers, the Scottish Parliament or individual churches. The Seceders, as they were called, felt that the local church was the proper authority to ordain ministers. The Seceder Presbyterians themselves soon split over whether civil government officials (or burghesses as they were called) should be compelled to swear an oath of allegiance to the official state church. Those who favored the oath were known as Burghers, and those who opposed it were known as Anti-Burghers. This was an early forerunner of the debate that eventually led—in the United States—to the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees the separation of church and state. Thus, the seminary where Thomas Campbell studied taught that individual churches had the authority to ordain ministers and that there should be no religious compulsion, but rather that people should be free when it came to their individual conscience. You see here ideas that, later on the American frontier, led to the founding of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

During Thomas' seminary studies, he spent part of each year in Ireland teaching. While on one of these teaching stints back home, he met Jane Corneige, a descendant of French Huguenots. (Huguenots were followers of the French-Swiss Protestant Reformer John Calvin.) Jane's ancestors had fled to Ireland to escape violent religious persecution at the hands of the Catholic Church, the official state church of France. Thomas fell in love with this diligent student of the Bible, and they soon married. In 1788, she gave birth to their first child, Alexander.

After completing his seminary training in 1791, Thomas Campbell devoted himself to teaching school as well as serving as a minister in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland. He also led the Irish movement seeking to reunite the Burgher and Anti-Burgher factions of

Presbyterianism. You see in his desire for Christian unity, a characteristic that, later on the American frontier, led to the founding of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

By 1804, Thomas had prospered sufficiently to open a school of his own, Richhill Academy. Unfortunately, after years of hard work as a teacher and preacher, his health began to fail. His physicians advised him to seek a better climate, so on April 1, 1807, he left seventeen-year-old Alexander in charge of both the family and the school, and set sail for America.

Thomas arrived in the United States at a time when religion was at its lowest point since the Revolutionary War. Desiring to make a difference, he quickly found work as a minister in the Presbyterian Church of Pennsylvania, and was assigned to Washington County on the frontier of the new nation. To his dismay, he discovered that the spirit of sectarianism was every bit as bitter in the New World as it had been in the Old. Not only would Presbyterians not get along with Christians of other denominations; the various Presbyterian factions refused to have any fellowship with one another.

Committed to the notion of Christian unity, Thomas sought to bring about peace between the various Presbyterian factions by inviting members of different churches to come together to celebrate the Lord's Supper. And what was the result? Within months of his arrival in Pennsylvania, he was brought up on heresy charges! His pleas for Christian fellowship and Christian liberty were in vain. He was forced to withdraw from the Presbyterian Church.

Thomas continued to preach because he had been called of God, but he was excluded from most churches, preaching instead in groves of trees and private houses. Two themes permeated his sermons: Christian liberty and Christian unity. He soon attracted a growing following, for many people were tired of the bitter and petty religious sectarianism and intolerance. One of his statements soon became the slogan of this growing movement that renounced divisive church creeds in favor of individual liberty to interpret the Bible for oneself: "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent."

His health greatly improved in the new climate, so he decided to make America his new home. On January 1, 1808, he wrote to his family to join him. The Campbell family departed Ireland on October 1 on the ship *Hibernia*, but they were shipwrecked on a small island off the coast of Scotland. Rather than sailing on immediately with winter approaching, they decide to take the opportunity for Alexander to attend the University of Glasgow for a year. The wonderful experience Alexander had at the university led to his personal decision that he must withdraw from the Presbyterian Church. Interestingly, without discussing it with one another, both Thomas *and* Alexander had come to the same decision and for the same reasons!

On August 3, 1809, the Campbell family sailed from Scotland and arrived in New York on September 29, 1809. Imagine the scene when the family was reunited and Alexander told his father that he had withdrawn from the Presbyterian Church over the issues of Christian unity and Christian liberty, only to learn that his father had done the same thing! What a

conversation that must have been! Next week we will learn—as Paul Harvey used to say—“the rest of the story.”²

At the burning bush, Moses *remembered* that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and he *remembered* that God had made certain promises regarding the descendants of Abraham. Once Moses remembered the past, he then learned the important role he was to play in fulfilling those promises. Likewise, in various revelatory moments of their own, Thomas and Alexander Campbell *remembered* that the church should focus on the few essentials of the faith and not get hung up on the numerous non-essentials. An oft-quoted motto captures this truth: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”³ Next week, we will learn what roles Thomas, and his son Alexander, were called to play in spreading this crucial Christian truth on the American frontier, leading to the founding of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Let us, this Epiphany Season, be open to revelatory moments in our own lives. *God is still speaking*; of that I am certain. The question is, Do we—as Jesus so often implored—have ears to hear? This Epiphany Season, let us *remember the past*, so that we might *envision the future*—for ourselves individually, and for Oakland Christian Church.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Dictionary.com (web).

² This historical summary of Thomas Campbell’s life is based on: H. Leo Boles, *Biographical Sketches of Gospel Preachers* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Co., 1932), pp. 13-18 (web); and David R. Kenney, “Great Preachers of The Past: Thomas Campbell (1763–1854),” delivered at the Ninth Annual West Virginia Christian Lectureship (October 5-8, 2008), pages 59-73 (web).

³ The historical origin of this maxim has long been debated. Obviously, the central ideas go back to the origin of Christianity, but it appears that the earliest recorded statement of the ideas in this form was by Marco Antonio de Dominis (1560-1624), Archbishop of Spalato.