

“Remembering the Past: Thomas McBride and Disciples in Missouri”
The Fourth in the Series “Remembering the Past, Envisioning the Future”

Isaiah 6:1-8

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Thomas McBride was born on July 25, 1777 in Virginia but was raised in Tennessee. His cousin, Andrew Jackson, became the seventh President of the United States, and McBride became a Baptist preacher. Under the influence of Barton Stone, however, McBride left the Baptist church in 1810 and joined The Restorationist Movement that was spreading across the American frontier.

In 1812, the Missouri Territory was carved out of the huge Louisiana Purchase, and soon many homesteaders from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia flooded onto the new frontier. Among this migration was Thomas McBride. In 1815, he moved to St. Charles, and then followed the Boone’s Lick Trail to mid-Missouri where, in 1816, he founded the first church of the Restorationist Movement west of the Mississippi River—Salt Creek Christian Church, eight miles west of modern-day Boonville. Soon other churches were founded: in 1822 Red Top Christian Church, in modern-day Hallsville, the first church of any denomination in Boone County; and then in 1824 Bear Creek Christian Church was founded at what is now the southwest corner of Albert-Oakland Park in northern Columbia. Within twenty years, McBride and other newly-arrived Disciples ministers had established 22 churches, including First Christian of Columbia in 1832, First Christian of Fulton in 1833, and Millersburg Christian Church in 1836.¹

By 1870 the rural area north of Bear Creek Christian Church and south of Redtop Christian Church had attained a sufficient population base to support a local church, which meant that families would no longer have to travel two or three hours by horse-drawn transportation to attend Sunday services. On August 21, 1872, William L. Parker deeded two acres of his large farm for the construction of a church, and forty-three individuals and families raised \$2,400 to construct a 42-by-52-foot, one-room white clapboard church. Set amid a grove of oak trees, it seemed only fitting that it be called Oakland Christian Church.

For the next fifty years, the congregation met every Sunday for Sunday School, and once a month a Disciples minister led a worship service. It was customary in those days for several rural churches to share a minister on a rotation basis. Protracted services, called “revival meetings,” an updated version of the old “camp meetings,” were a common means of evangelism in those days; these revival services were an interesting mix of preaching and socializing in the days before radio and other forms of modern entertainment. Oakland Christian Church flourished during these early years.

The 1920s, however, witnessed several dramatic social upheavals that resulted in rural churches everywhere experiencing a sharp decline in attendance. Many, like Bear Creek

Christian Church, went out of existence, but Oakland managed to survive—though just barely. And what were those dramatic social changes that so affected rural churches?

One change was a general decline in “spirituality” and a corresponding rise in “materialism” following World War One and the devastating Spanish Influenza pandemic of 1918. Whether you refer to the era as The Roaring Twenties or The Jazz Age, the new era brought about significant change, and not all of it good. A resurgence of inward-looking nationalism led America to withdraw from the international scene in favor of isolationist policies and a *laissez-faire* form of capitalism. A skyrocketing stock market produced unprecedented prosperity, which unfortunately resulted in an attitude of excess—even decadence—among the wealthy. This was compounded by the “lostness”—that is, the aimlessness, the restlessness—of those who had witnessed firsthand the horrors of modern warfare. Gertrude Stein coined the term, “The Lost Generation,” to refer to them. This period of American history is vividly depicted in the novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemmingway.

The second major change of this era was a mass migration from the farm to the city. The development of new agricultural methods during the War Years to increase production in order to feed the troops and our allies, led to huge surpluses after the war—far larger than the market could handle. Farm products and farmland fell in value, while the cost of the products that farmer had to buy increased. Farms began to fail in large numbers, forcing people to move to urban areas where they could find employment. By 1929, the year of the Crash, for the first time in history more Missourians lived in cities than in rural areas. This dramatic population shift emptied the rural churches, forcing many to close.

It wasn't until the winter of 1933-1934—the depths of the Great Depression—that Oakland began to experience a spiritual revival. Soon, enough people were attending that preaching services could be held twice a month instead of monthly. In 1935, the congregation refurbished the building inside and out: wallpaper, new paraments, window shades, and new paint. In 1939, kerosene lamps, which had illuminated the building for almost 70 years, were replaced by electric lights—what a difference that made! Yes, things were looking up for Oakland.

But less than two years later, the country was plunged into another war—this time in the Pacific as well as in Europe. Sunday School continued to be held each week, but attendance dropped so sharply that the congregation went back to having preaching services only one Sunday a month.

After four long and heart-breaking years, World War Two came to an end and the troops returned home, eager to resume a normal life—and to begin families. Thus began the Baby Boom years, and Oakland Christian Church rose to meet the new ministry challenge. Soon, the church found itself filled with happy, growing families. The next two decades saw attendance at Oakland swell to a level it had never before attained, as it became the center of the Keene community.

In 1949 modern oil heaters were installed to break winter's chill, and in 1951 a 20-by-40-foot fellowship hall was added to accommodate social events. The new hall was used not only by the church, but was also made available to community groups such as the Keene 4-H Club, the Keene PTA, and Charity's 20th-Century Extension Club. Continued growth of the Sunday School during the early 1950s led to the addition of the Education Space in 1956, as well as the Narthex to shelter the new center double-doors into the Sanctuary that had been added a year earlier. The capstone to all this growth during the Baby Boom years could be said to be symbolized by the addition of the 35-foot steeple in 1957.

What happened at Oakland Christian Church during the post-war years happened in churches across the nation. Church attendance for all denominations peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For Disciples, the pinnacle year was 1958.²

The gradual decline in attendance that Oakland has experienced over the past 55 years mirrors the gradual decline almost all churches have experienced, especially rural churches. A sermon is not the place to go into the reasons for this gradual decline, but understanding these reasons would be helpful as we develop plans for outreach. Perhaps we can discuss those at another time. For now, however, let me just say that I do not sense a spirit of defeat and depression at Oakland, but rather an optimistic spirit—and optimism is the indispensable item for future growth. For example, recently, the congregation made the decision to update our physical facilities in order to better minister to people. What has been done so far in Fellowship Hall and the Educational Space—and what is currently being done to renovate the restrooms—reveals a great deal about the spirit of Oakland. Soon we will be considering renovations to the Sanctuary, the first such renovation in over 50 years. Stay tuned for news from the design committee!

I'm excited to be your minister at this point in history, for I believe that good things lie ahead for Oakland. We live in a pivotal age. These are hinge years, transitional years—"cocoon years," if you will—in the life of the Church Universal *and* Oakland Christian Church. Let me illustrate what I mean by "cocoon years" by asking you to think for a moment about the life cycle of butterflies.

A butterfly begins life as a caterpillar. Caterpillars are interesting creatures, fun to watch as they crawl along, eating everything in sight. The next stage of life is called chrysalis, when the caterpillar turns into a pupa. In this cocoon-like stage of life, everything seems to be dormant; nothing seems to be happening. But inside the cocoon a spectacular change—called "metamorphosis"—is taking place as the caterpillar slowly turns into a butterfly. When all the changes have taken place, a beautiful butterfly emerges from the cocoon to begin a new life, no longer crawling but flying!

I believe the Universal Church is currently in a cocoon stage, and not for the first time. Cocoon years have happened before. From the last cocoon period, the Protestant Reformation emerged! Now, what the church has been for the past 500 years is undergoing another

profound change—a spiritual metamorphosis. Things may appear to be dormant at present, but as the old saying goes, “looks can be deceiving.” I believe a profound change is underway. What will the church look like when it emerges from these cocoon years? I have some ideas, and I believe it will be wonderful. But for now, we must acknowledge that we are in the midst of a cocoon period. The proper question for us to ask is: How should we live during these cocoon years so that a beautiful butterfly church might emerge?

My suggestions come from our scripture lesson for today. Isaiah was a royal prophet; that is, he was tasked with bringing God’s word to the King and other officials of Judah. The dramatic vision that forms today’s scripture lesson occurred “in the year that King Uzziah died.” This notation of time is significant. You see, Uzziah had been a devout King of Judah, and all Judah had fared well during his long and peaceful reign. But Isaiah was concerned about Uzziah’s son, Jothan, who assumed the throne. He lacked his father’s character, and in hindsight, we know that his grandson, Ahaz, proved to be even worse when he came to the throne. Isaiah was right to be worried.

Thus, at a time when Isaiah was concerned about the spiritual welfare of Judah, he had a dramatic vision. In the vision, he saw God enthroned in the Holy of Holies, attended by six-winged seraphs who chanted, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” The foundations of the temple shook at the sound of their voice, and smoke filled the room.

Acutely aware that he was not worthy of such an awesome sight, Isaiah exclaimed, “Woe is me! I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” In response to Isaiah’s confession of sin, one of the Seraphs took a live coal from the altar and touched Isaiah’s lips with it, cleansing him.

Then Isaiah heard God say, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah responded, “Here I am; send me!”

In the verses that follow our scripture lesson, Isaiah is given depressing news about his ministry. He is to bring God’s message to the Kings of Judah and to the people, but they will reject the message. And, sadly, Isaiah is told, their rejection of the life-giving message will lead them to spiritual and physical ruin brought about in the devastating Babylonian conquest and captivity. But not all is lost, for Isaiah also learns that “a remnant will return.” This remnant of Judah is likened symbolically to a tree stump from which a new shoot will grow, becoming a huge tree. Isaiah himself did not live to see this happen, but it did come to fruition, just as God promised.

Now, what does this say to us who are living during a cocoon period of church history? To me it says that we are to follow Isaiah’s example. We are to continue to be a faithful people, sharing the good news of God’s love with everyone around us, through our words and our deeds. We may or may not live to see the new growth shoot up from the stump—or using our earlier metaphor, we may or may not live to see the butterfly emerge from the cocoon—but we

are to live and work filled with the confidence that comes from knowing that God's promise will come to fruition. Our labors are not in vain because we serve the same Lord of hosts whom Isaiah saw in his inspiring vision.

The current cocoon years will not last forever. A butterfly stage of the church will emerge, of that I am confident. By our faithfulness, we help to shape the future of the church. By seeking new and creative ways to minister to the world, we are contributing to the grand metamorphosis that is occurring inside the cocoon. One day the beautiful butterfly will emerge and take flight.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ "Thomas Crawford McBride," *Pioneer History: Churches of Christ and Christian Churches in the Pacific Northwest* (web).

² This brief history of Oakland Christian Church is summarized from *Oakland Christian Church 1872-1959*, author unknown; and Griffith A. Hamlin, *Remember-Renew-Rejoice: 150 Years of Disciples in Mid-America 1837-1987* (Fulton, MO: Ovid Bell Press; The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Mid America, 1986).