

***“Century Service - 1850 - 1900: Crisis and Hope”***  
***Psalm 97 and I Thessalonians 5:1-11***  
***May 24, 2009***

In the first half of the 1800's, a spirit of revival sweeps the ever-enlarging country. In New York state near Palmyra, Joseph Smith has a vision and the seed of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is planted. Experimental communities like Amana and Oneida spring up. The spirit of revival is so hot that the region is referred to as being burned over! In other areas, Methodism is taking hold. Along with Baptists, the Methodists go west in great number. A Presbyterian named Conway Phelps Wing leaves Phelps County, New York and for reasons of health, he ends up in the south. In 1843 he visits in Carlisle for two Sundays. He makes an impression on the congregation and is called to serve as the pastor here in 1848. In a congregation of 263 members, Conway Wing is paid what is considered a very liberal annual salary of \$1000, a salary which is increased by \$200 - 16 years later.

A period of disruption and disagreement in the congregation preceded Wing's arrival, leaving a depleted and disorganized Sunday school - but it does not remain so for long. Under the direction of William B. Bradbury a new primary department is organized in 1848; Christian education finds new life. Soldiers from the nearby garrison are invited to join Col. Edwin Sumner and his family at worship. Soon soldiers can be seen marching to the church to be seated in the gallery. Aware of the importance of education, Wing establishes a library in the church, stocking it with many books and religious periodicals. Trusting in the importance of knowing the Westminster Catechism, Wing directs efforts toward young people to learn it. By 1859, 38 young people know the answers the questions of the catechism, beginning with the first questions: "What is the chief end of man?" Wing also preaches at the Union Church in Plainfield and at a church in Mt. Holly Springs. The church has a debt of \$2400. As a result of a three day effort by Dr. Wing, the debt is completely paid. Because First Presbyterian is affiliated with the New School Presbyterians in the midst of a basically Old School region, the congregation is not well regarded by other Presbyterians. But Wing will have none of that. He makes sure there are regular pulpit exchanges between First and Second churches, so both congregations will at least know the pastors. Wing proves instrumental in ecumenical affairs, encouraging participation in the new Week of Prayer by all congregations. By 1859, Wing urges the formation of a local branch of the Young Men's Christian Association.

When the centennial of the church building is observed in 1857, a former pastor, the Rev. George Duffield III speaks at the service at Meeting House Springs Cemetery where D. Bethune Duffield presents an original ode for the occasion. In 1858 Wing is appointed as a professor at Dickinson College where he gives expository lectures and is involved in languages. Along with pew rents, which are increased (and a few people are compelled to move to the gallery), envelopes are also used to raise funds for particular causes. During these same years the church facilities receive new lights, a refurbished gallery and fresh paint; heat is installed and better seats are added to the lecture room next to the sanctuary. A new organ is placed in the sanctuary(1858) - and not without controversy of note!

Much wider, deeper, and far more serious controversies engage the conversations, minds, and prayers of church people, and not just Presbyterians, although our own Presbyterian history reflects well the crisis of the this period. In the nation, not yet 100 years old, Presbyterians have already divided into several groups, most notably the Old School and the New School. A patchwork of presbyteries exist for each side. In 1858, the Reformed Covenanters of Scotland join with the Associate Presbyterians to form the United Presbyterian Church of North America - UP/NA - to add to the mix. Among all these Presbyterians, “the” issue of the day is slavery about which historian Sydney Ahlstrom comments, “Honorable, ethical, God fearing people as well as self-seeking, egotistic opportunists and status seekers were on both sides. Social, economic, political, and psychological forces intensified feelings, sharpened disputes, clouded the fundamental issues, and consolidated existing fears and antipathies.” (655) .

Early in the 1800’s the Presbyterian General Assembly had already declared that slavery “was utterly inconsistent with the law of God.” (648) The New Schoolers are definitely anti-slavery. In fact, between 1847 and 1867, the newly formed Presbyterian Free Church Synod denies membership to any slaveholders. Some Old Schoolers in the north even go so far as to urge northern states to secede! Finally, as with Methodists and Baptists, the pressures are so great that the denomination splits geographically and politically. In 1857, the Presbyterian Church in the United States pulls together southern Old and New School adherents into one body. Commonly known as the “Southern Presbyterian Church,” it insisted on “neutrality of churches” in the matter of slavery. Nevertheless, by 1862 it declares, “This struggle is not alone for civil rights and property and home, but also for religion, for the church, for the gospel, for existence itself.”

In his personal history of this congregation, Conway Wing acknowledges the atmosphere of this congregation at the time of the Civil War, writing, “The principles of everyone in our community were severely tested.” He notes some initial deference toward the South, given that the town has many connections with Southerners, particularly through Dickinson College, where people from north and south studied and lived together. Yet Wing is also clear about the allegiances of the congregation, stating, “Our people were not divided. Their votes were given for the righteous cause and against the extension of slavery, whatever might be the consequences, leaving the result to God.”

When war erupts between the states, a large number of men in the congregation and the community respond to the first enlistment, claims the record. “As they departed, they were cheered by a large assemblage of citizens in the church and on the public square, with earnest prayers and presentation of a Bible to each soldier.” (Wing 224) Refreshments are offered to troops passing through on their way south. Women knit and sew. Prayer and counsel are freely given to soldiers. Meanwhile some members of the church and the town leave, taking with them their sympathies toward the south.

Julia Ward Howe is inspired to write a song which becomes what Ahlstrom calls the crusader’s hymn of the Union, “but the literal content of her verses would not have

prevented the Confederacy from adopting it.” In fact, the tune for “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” is set to a popular tune with alternate words about John Brown’s body, referring to an uprising at Harper’s Ferry, not too far from Carlisle.

Without music but with intent, Confederate troops enter Carlisle in the summer of 1863, extracting what they could from merchants and citizens. Yet, as Wing observes, “It was not surprising therefore that when the town was in possession of the enemy this congregation was especially obnoxious to them” (225) This attitude does not keep Confederate soldiers from burning the barracks or the gasworks. Neither does it restrain their cannon fire on the town. According to the new historical sign on West High Street, shrapnel strikes the stone of the church among other buildings, including the courthouse across West High Street. Eventually Union troops re-enter the town as confederates turn toward Gettysburg’s bloody battles. Some of the wounded from that conflict are brought to Carlisle where they are attended and cared for by citizens.

During this same period, fugitive slaves in the area are brought together. They are taught to read and are instructed in religion. Mrs. Wing is among the teachers. One source indicates about 200 African Americans meet in the gallery of the church for instruction. Eventually a separate congregation is formed, one reference indicating it is the West Street AME Zion Church; another names a Third Presbyterian Church.

In April of 1865, General Lee surrenders at Appomatox. Soon after, on Good Friday that April, John Wilkes Booth assassinates President Abraham Lincoln. The nation is stunned. Through the even darker days which follow, churches across the country provide services of remembrance. At the public service of mourning at First Presbyterian, the sermon is based on a passage from Second Samuel, “And the victory that day was turned into mourning.”

By 1867, efforts are made to establish a national day of reconciliation as people try to make some sense of what has transpired. Francis Miles Finch organizes the ladies of Columbus, Mississippi. They reverently place flowers over the graves of the fallen, both the Blue and the Gray. A poem of the day ends with this verse: “No more shall the war-cry sever, Or the winding rivers be red. They banish our anger forever When they laurel the graves of the dead. Under the sod and the dew, waiting the judgment day; Under the one, the Blue; Under the other, the Gray.” So begins a tradition we mark this weekend, known as Memorial Day.

Many books have been written on the Civil War and the period which followed, known as “reconstruction,” all of which are beyond the scope and intention of one sermon! In the broadest sense, Martin Marty describes the post-war era as “a time of unprecedented change.” The wounds of the war are immense. More than ever, people are heading to the west. America is filling up with a new wave of immigration, including many people who are not Protestant. Roman Catholicism increases, meaning Protestants no longer have a monopoly on the culture. The Pope issues a decree of papal infallibility, raising suspicions and, in some regions, hostility. Factories give rise to new urban centers.

Women begin to assert their rights. Science brings fresh insights and major controversies (think Charles Darwin).

The rise of cities also gives rise to a new group of religious luminaries. One might even claim the beginning of “celebrity clerics,” including such people as Dwight L. Moody and Philips Brooks, each addressing different audiences yet influencing the religious scene. A much more individualistic gospel takes hold. Connecting with a wave of new prosperity, particularly in the north and notable among people now referred to as “Robber Barons,” preacher Richard Crowell preaches, “It is your duty to get rich.”

Most people are not aware of the deep divisions and social changes which, upon retrospect, are more obvious. Like most denominations, Presbyterians are trying to find healing and reunion and hope. Most problematic will be a reunion between the northern and southern Presbyterians. Attempts will be made for years, until reunion finally comes in 1983! From the beginning, Conway Wing is involved in trying to move the larger church toward healing. He attends a number of synod and General Assembly gatherings. Finally, at a meeting in Pittsburgh in 1869, arrangements for reunion of Old and New School adherents in the north, at least, is adopted. When presbytery boundaries are reorganized, this congregation returns to the Carlisle presbytery. A massive celebration occurs and funds are raised to encourage building. This church erects the tower and a larger 2 story stone building, dedicating it on October 18, 1873.

Conway Wing is tired! He wants to resign. His first two requests are denied. Instead the church grants him a longer vacation in the summer. In 1875, he succeeds in approval for retirement and is made “pastor emeritus,” is still invited to preach and is granted a “free pew.”

Joseph Vance, a recent widower, is installed in April, 1876 and Conway Wing preaches the sermon! As in many parts of the country, this is a season of renewal. Presbyterians from both congregations, along with Methodist and evangelical churches, unite for worship. The debt from the tower construction is paid, the sanctuary receives curved pews and upholstery, the pulpit is lowered, and various changes are made to windows, a vestibule, and the gallery. The first pipe organ is installed, as is central heating.

Eugene Mapes arrives in 1887 as the next pastor, serving for five years, during which time the Haskell organ is placed behind the pulpit in a rearranged choir loft. For the time, hope is higher with congregations working together more frequently in the community. In the closing years of this century, this congregation will welcome another pastor, the Rev. Andrew Hagerty. During his thirty-six years of service the congregation will be caught up in national crisis - as well as hope. Meanwhile it is time to be, in the words of scripture, “Awake and sober - building one another up.”

RESOURCES:

Ahlstrom, Sydney, *A Religious History of the American People*

Hays, George P., *Presbyterians* (1892)

Marty, Martin E., *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experiment in America*

Wing, Conway P., *A History of the First Presbyterian Church on the Square, Carlisle PA*

*Rev. Jon A. Black*  
*First Presbyterian Church*  
*On the Square*  
*Carlisle PA*

*275<sup>th</sup> Anniversary - Century Service: 1850-1900*