

[PRAYER] I thank you for braving the weather out there today, we need the rain that's coming, to be sure, but sometimes we get more from God than we expect, don't we? It turns out that God is not a faucet that we can turn on and off, to get exactly what we want, where we want it, when we want it; what is good for us in the long run means that sometimes we make adjustments for what we get in the short run.

So today's abundance of rain should remind us that, for weeks, we have been having drought conditions, here, and that the pouring rain will help to fill our reservoirs, and prepare new growth in God's beautiful creation. It's a bit like the acorns that I highlighted in today's children's sermon: in order for life to spread abundantly, we have to prepare to be extra-fruitful on a regular basis. [THIN NUTS] The oak trees in my yard aren't putting out a lot of nuts at all, this year, [THICK NUTS] but last year, wow, there were more than you could shake a stick at! This is part of the oak tree's strategy for survival. If the oak trees put out the same number of nuts each year, then the population of animals eating them would grow to eat them all. By growing extra nuts sometimes, these oak trees will produce left-over nuts that can sprout into new trees regularly. [BLANK]

I think that churches are a lot like these oak trees. If we look at the history of Christianity, there have been many periods when churches spread like wildfire, and also long periods where they did not grow much at all. Our new District Superintendent, Reverend Alpher Sylvester, showed us a lot of interesting information at our Church Conference on Wednesday night about patterns of church growth. One key fact that he highlighted was that churches are growing very rapidly right now in Africa and Asia, while in the United States, most are barely growing at all. Like the oak trees, there appear to be different seasons for extra-abundant faith around the world right now.

What Reverend Alpher pointed out also, though, is that this extra abundance doesn't just happen: it's planned for. Churches that don't plan for it, he pointed out, grow for a while, then level out, and then begin a long decline. This is nothing new, of course. If you look at historical data, Methodism in the United States has always been strong, and United Methodism remains the largest mainline Protestant denomination in America. But the share of the American population who are Methodists has not grown since 1850, about the time that this church was founded. Our slice of the pie of faith is large, but it grew mostly because the population as a whole was growing.

There are lots of reasons why Methodism did not spread in America as quickly as other forms of Christianity, but I think that the main reason is a simple one, one that brings us back to that oak tree. You could say that Methodism became like an oak tree that never planned on having those years of extraordinary abundance to spread itself further. Instead, Methodism became like an oak tree that grew tall, and big, but that fed all of its nuts to the same critters, year in, and year out, instead of spreading new oak trees faster than other trees.

We have strong faith, deep faith, faith that has sustained us through good times and bad. But we need to think about how our faith can be a spreading faith, a faith that

can move like wildfire through new generations, and new groups of people in our communities. To do this means being not just a Christian church, but a Christian movement, not just a place where faith is celebrated, but a place where faith changes lives.

There was someone who understood this difference very well, and his name was Moses. Our Hebrew Bible reading today has skipped ahead to the end of the five books of Moses, to the final chapter of Deuteronomy. We see Moses, a flawed but obedient man, called by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt, now at the end of this life. He lived an extraordinary one hundred and twenty-two years, leading the Israelites through forty years of desert living. Moses helped God form his people into desert disciples for two generations. Almost all of the people who had come out of Egypt with Moses had already died, and so Moses found himself leading not a church, but a movement, a movement of faith that had been forged in hard times, about to enter a land of plenty. The faith that Israel had received in the desert was extraordinary. It was a faith born of burning bushes, of parting oceans, of water gushing from rocks, from simple food provided by God each day, from messages from God's very self coming in the most extraordinary places. It was a faith not born from the faucet-like religion of a nearby temple or synagogue, but a faith born in a tabernacle, a portable worship space built of cloth and poles that called the people together to the word of the living God. Moses had been God's instrument to form this movement. It was Moses' immortal legacy.

And now, at the end of his life, Moses would not live to see the faith movement of Israel flourish in a land flowing with milk and honey. Instead, God would turn to Joshua, son of Nun, anointed with God's spirit of wisdom, when Moses laid his hands on him. Joshua, not a relative of Moses, would inherit a movement, ready to conquer a new land through faith. Moses was buried in a place that was soon forgotten. But his legacy, his movement, would endure, until, one day, a simple man from Galilee would revive it, and spread it like faith had never been spread before, by condensing the wisdom of God given to Moses into one great commandment: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.

We are the legacy of Moses and Jesus. We are the legacy of their followers, who created a system of discipleship that conquered the world through faith, faith that conquered and endured not through armies, or bureaucracies, or catchy slogans, or the rattling of tambourines, but through faith that conquered the hearts and minds of people who needed to be saved by God's everlasting love, for their sake and the world's sake. Our legacy is not measured in family trees, but the acorns that fell from those trees in extravagant abundance, to feed the faith of generations of families far beyond the roots of their own trees. Our legacy is not South Meriden Trinity United Methodist Church, or the Methodist society founded here in 1851, but a movement called Methodism, [FIELD PREACHING] a movement born in the fields of England, where John Wesley, a man touched by God, preached to thousands of people who had endured the long drought of faith in a nation where their church had forgotten them, and brought them healing and

hope that the world had not seen in thousands of years. [BLANK]

Our legacy is to end the long drought of faith in this modern world, and to let real faith, living faith, saving faith, rain mightily, heavily, overwhelmingly, until faith overflows the banks of every stream, every river, every lake, every possible container that could hold faith back, until the whole world is anointed with faith, as Moses anointed Joshua, as Jesus, the son of God, anointed his disciples, as the preachers who first served this church anointed its founders with Christian love and hope.

Our legacy is here, right now, sitting in this church. You are the church that must awaken faith in yourselves, and in the world, for the sake of God's legacy, and turn your faith into a Methodist movement again. Many of your ancestors understood that it took more than a church to do this, because, they, too, were part of the original Methodist movement. [CLASS WINDOW] When you first walk into our church, on your left is a stained glass window donated by a Methodist class, the small discipleship groups that were the heart of the original Methodist movement. These are the first ancestors of this church to greet you. They greet you with the simple, powerful system of faith that changed Christianity forever. Your legacy is their faith, and their system of faith, life-saving, life-changing faith. [BLANK]

We have had our first church conference together as a church. I thank all of you who worked so hard and faithfully to make that conference happen on time, for the sake of this church's future, and I thank all of you who put your faith into action for the sake of this church. In that church conference, you affirmed me as your Pastor, and I affirmed many of you as leaders of this church. We are now here together as God's people for one vital mission, the mission that will be our common legacy: the future of this church as a base of operations for the United Methodist movement. In the weeks and months ahead, we will work and pray together to develop deeper Christian discipleship, new forms of discipleship, and revive old forms of discipleship, that are long neglected, but more important than ever. Thousands of United Methodist churches around the world are doing the same thing. Many of them are growing, and quite a few of them are doubling and tripling in size, as more and more people find true, living faith, faith that will create God's enduring legacy, for generations to come.

It is my privilege to serve you as your Pastor as we seek to anoint the world with faith in the living God. May we all come to accept that anointment of faith in our hearts, for our sake, for our children's sake, for our grandchildren's sake, and for the sake of generations of new and saved Christians, who we must feed with our abundance of faith. The drought time is over. The lean harvests are finished. Be anointed for discipleship that lives, that saves, and that endures, as our legacy. Amen.