

**METHODISM IN THE AMERICAN FOREST:
LIVING IN, BUT SEEING THROUGH AND BEYOND NATURE¹**

RUSSELL E. RICHEY

Think for a moment of our (United Methodist) current hymned affirmations about God-the-Father and His care of His creation. A few selections should suffice:

This is my Father's world
Morning has broken
All things bright and beautiful
God, who stretched the spangled heavens

Or consider the ecclesiological and Christological statements we sing on a Sunday morning:

Blest be the tie that binds
The church is not a building
Christ for the world we sing
We've a story to tell to the nations
Go, make of all disciples
It only takes a spark
Onward, Christian soldiers
Rise up, O men of God
God of grace and God of glory
Whom shall I send? Our Maker cries
Lord, you give the great commission

“This is my Father's world!” “Onward, Christian soldiers!” Methodists today know that when tracking the path from sin to salvation, we follow John Bunyan's counsel—*The Pilgrim's Progress from This World to That Which Is to Come*—but in traveling through must do our part to make our world and our societies ready for the prophesied and promised kingdom. Our hymns, as always, invoke Spirit, Christ, and God, and look heavenward. But many, as the above illustrate, now also summon us to strategize, collaborate, labor, and look for the new creation which God has made, is making, and will make. Today, United Methodists sing a social as well as a personal gospel.

¹ This version of the presentation at the 2016 HSUMC conference draws on and adapts an article published in issue 119, pages 30-32, of *Christian History*, edited by former Methodist Librarian for GCAH, Jennifer Woodruff Tait. The hymns cited in this essay are from *The United Methodist Hymnal: Book of United Methodist Worship* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989).

Consider, by contrast, how and of what our eighteenth-century kindred sang:

1 ALL glory to God in the **sky**,
And **peace** upon **earth** be restored!
O Jesus, exalted on high,
Appear our omnipotent Lord!
Who, meanly in Bethlehem born,
Didst stoop to redeem a lost **race**,
Once more to thy **creatures** return,
And reign in thy **kingdom** of grace.

2 When thou in our **flesh** didst appear,
All **nature** acknowledged thy **birth**;
Arose the acceptable **year**,
And heaven was opened on **earth**:
Receiving its Lord from above,
The **world** was united to bless
The giver of concord and love,
The **Prince** and the author of **peace**.

3 O wouldst thou again be made known!
Again in thy Spirit descend,
And set up in each of thine own
A **kingdom** that never shall end.
Thou only art able to bless,
And make the glad **nations** obey,
And bid the dire enmity cease,
And bow the **whole world** to thy sway.

4 Come then to thy servants again,
Who long thy appearing to know,
Thy quiet and **peaceable reign**
In mercy establish **below**;
All sorrow before thee shall fly,
And anger and hatred be o'er,
And envy and malice shall die,
And discord afflict us no more

5 No horrid **alarum** of **war**
Shall break our eternal repose,
No **sound of the trumpet** is there,
Where Jesus's Spirit o'erflows;
Appeased by the charms of thy grace,
We all shall in amity join,
And kindly each other embrace,
And love with a passion like thine.

ALL Glory to God in the Sky, And Peace Upon Earth be Restored!

So early American Methodists sang, looking through the earth around them and acclaiming their entry into the world-to-come. Their atlas? The personal hymnbooks pulled from pocket or purse.² By 1800, the new nation's Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) boasted publishing annually and then pushing its twenty-third edition of *Pocket Hymn-Book, Designed as a Constant Companion for the Pious*. So guided by John Wesley's selection of brother Charles Wesley's verse but similarly counseled by fervid preaching, hymn-filled class meetings and crowded quarterly conferences, the American adherents lived in but also saw through nature, world, and nation.

"**Sky,**" "**peace,**" "**earth,**" "**race,**" "**creatures,**" "**kingdom,**" "**flesh,**" "**nature,**" "**year,**" "**world,**" "**prince,**" "**peace,**" "**nations,**" "**servants,**" "**peaceable reign,**" "**alarm,**" "**war,**" "**sound,**" and "**trumpet**"—the above hymn's verses like those of all of the *Pocket Hymn-Book* three hundred hymns reverberate with creation and nature words BUT point to AND beyond this world to that to come. [See **bolded** words in the hymn.] "Nature," employed twenty-eight times, referenced divine, human, and worldly reality, but even in the latter instance typically pointed to the world to come. One hymn proclaimed "Nature's end we wait to see." Another: "How beautiful nature now! How dark and sad before! With joy we view the pleasing change, and nature's God adore."³ "Creation" appeared in seven hymns. Two verses from one pled: "Thou hast laid the sure foundation Of my hope, build me up; Finish thy creation. . . . Partner of thy perfect nature, Let me be, now in thee, a new spotless creature."⁴ Similarly, "earth" though referencing this world often (over eighty times) functioned to claim the world-to-come as home: "Come, let us anew Our journey pursue, with vigour arise, And press to our permanent place in the skies; Of heavenly birth, Tho' wand'ring on earth, This is not our place. . . ."⁵ "World," less ambiguously as well, pointed to this planet (thirty-seven times). Successive verses of one hymn began:

² *Pocket Hymn-Book, Designed as a Constant Companion for the Pious. Collected from Various Authors*, 23rd edition (Philadelphia: Henry Tuckniss for Ezekiel Cooper, 1800), 61-62. This hymn appeared earlier in Charles Wesley's *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*, 1st edition (London: William Strahan, 1745). Note that unlike our eighteenth-century compatriots we can pull down a digital version of the hymnbook and search it for its earthly and heavenly language. Both this little essay and my *Methodism in the American Forest* benefit from, indeed were impossible without, the ability to do electronic searches for worldly, particularly forest-related, terms. This hymn does not appear in United Methodism's current or immediately prior hymnbook. But post-Civil War southern Methodists must have found it comforting. See *A Collection of Hymns for Public, Social, and Domestic Worship* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1885), 73-74.

³ *Pocket Hymn-Book*, 229, 218.

⁴ *Pocket Hymn-Book*, 50.

⁵ *Pocket Hymn-Book*, 182. "Earth" was used eighty-two times but similarly. Characteristically, this hymn reverberates with natural terms—journey, skies, earth, pilgrims, country, land, skies, home—but the last verse makes clear the reality to which they point: "gloriously hurry out souls to the skies . . . and hasten us home."

“Strangers and pilgrims here below, This earth we know is not our place, . . . We’ve no abiding city here, But seek a city out of sight: . . . Patient th’ appointed race to run, This weary world we cast behind, . . .⁶

Once More to Thy Creatures Return, And Reign in Thy Kingdom of Grace

Christian hymns, of course, have always pointed back to creation, forward to the eschaton, upward to God-in-three-persons and back to Jesus of Nazareth. Not all movements, however, have with Methodists and their revivalism-birthered kindred so lived into their hymnody and towards the heavenly promised land. More established churches have relied on the Psalms and centuries of verse to remap the world and find new home therein for institutional buildings, leadership, practices, regulations, and daily activities. Puritans strictly and their Congregationalist offspring and Presbyterians more poetically lived off the Psalter, Old Testament as well as New, and other scriptural counsel for pilgrimage through daily conflict, limited resources and life’s pressures. Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans and other Christian movements had liturgies, ecclesial dicta, ancient hymns and kindred guidance for living today.

To such realistic depictions of the wonders of creation and life therein MEC leaders might well come had they read the several volumes of John Wesley’s *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation: or A Compendium of Natural Philosophy*. However, pocket hymn books—not his summation of Enlightenment-era research—guided the preachers sent by John Wesley to assume leadership of his movement in the new world.

American Methodism tried initially to honor one of Wesley’s commandments. Preach in the fields, on the streets or wherever the unchurched can be gathered! In the colonies and new nation, however, Wesley’s preachers discovered that his imperative had to be adjusted, given the blistering American summer sun. Only a fool would endure shade-less preaching in a field and expect gathered listeners to endure such folly. Instead, when crowds exceeded the capacity of a home or small chapel, the preachers gathered congregations in the shade—cathedraled in a stately forest or under an oak’s embracing branches.⁷ (Even in notoriously cloudy Britain, Wesley himself occasionally made his own sylvan retreat; there are forty-odd times he reported preaching under trees or in a grove.)

Relishing these natural forest cathedrals, the American preachers also found the woods a place for solitude, prayer, and devotions. And as they

⁶ *Pocket Hymn-Book*, 56. The thirty-six other “world” references typically as well pointed to the world to come.

⁷ Wesley had occasionally made his own sylvan retreat from the British sun. For the more extended discussion on which this draws, see Richey, *Methodism in the American Forest* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2015), and for illustration of the forty-some times that John Wesley reported preaching under trees or in a grove and the few instances for which heat drove him there see that volume’s appendix. Sylvan occasions represented a small percentage of the thousands of times that Wesley preached outdoors.

took Methodism into sparsely settled areas and particularly as they followed the frontier west, they found forests to be wilderness, full of dangers, some life-threatening, a challenge. All three experiences of the American woodland—as a shady preaching spot, as woods for prayer, as dark and sometimes dangerous forest challenging to itinerant preachers—proved defining of early American Methodism. So her people and especially her leaders experienced the new world as natural cathedral, as devotional retreat, and as wilderness challenge. But though such usages in journal or letter referenced specific natural sites, they typically looked through nature to the world beyond. As they sang, so Methodists lived for, towards, and hopefully into “A **kingdom** that never shall end.”

**O Wouldst Thou Again be Made Known!
 Again in Thy Spirit Descend,
 And Set Up in Each of Thine Own
 A Kingdom that Never Shall End**

Methodism’s threefold relation to the forest as spiritual realm defined the itinerancy across settlements by its first great leader and shaper of the American movement, Francis Asbury.⁸ In July, 1776, traveling in present-day West Virginia, Asbury spoke of the forest as confessional: “*Wednesday*, 31. Spent some time in the woods alone with God, and found it a peculiar time of love and joy. O delightful employment! All my soul was centered in God!” In June 1781, itinerating in Berkeley County in West Virginia, Asbury experienced the wilderness challenge but also woodland solitude with God: “*Tuesday*, 5. Had a rough ride over hills and dales to Guests. Here brother Pigman met me, and gave an agreeable account of the work on the south branch of Potomac. I am kept in peace; and greatly pleased I am to get into the **woods**, where, although alone, I have blessed company, and sometimes think, Who so happy as myself?”⁹ In June, 1787, while in New Jersey, Asbury recorded

⁸ John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); and *American Saint: Francis Asbury and the Methodists* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2009). See also Darius L. Salter, *America’s Bishop: The Life of Francis Asbury* (Nappanee, IN: Francis Asbury Press, 2003).

⁹ Francis Asbury, *Journal of Rev. Francis Asbury: Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York and Cincinnati: Eaton & Mains; Jennings & Pye, 1821) 1: 425; cf. *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark (London: Epworth, and Nashville: Abingdon, 1958), 1:405. Hereinafter noted as “Asbury, *Journal*” and “JLFA” respectively. In July, 1776, Asbury had dwelt on the two-fold character of the forest—confessional and challenge, the latter in this case not from the forest but from its Native American inhabitants:

Wednesday, 31. Spent some time in the **woods** alone with God, and found it a peculiar time of love and joy. O delightful employment! All my soul was centred in God! The next day I unexpectedly met with brother W.; and while preaching at three o’clock to an increased company, the word produced great seriousness and attention. And we had a happy, powerful meeting in the evening at Mr. G.’s. But my mind is in some degree disturbed by the reports of battles and slaughters. It seems the Cherokee Indians have also begun to break out, and the English ships have been coasting to and fro, watching for some advantages: but what can they expect to accomplish without an army of two or three hundred thousand men? And even then, there would be but little prospect of their success. O that this dispensation might answer its proper end! That the people would fear the Lord, and sincerely devote themselves to his service! Then, no doubt, wars and bloodshed would cease (Asbury, *Journal* 1:193 and JLFA 1:195).

one of many instances of cathedral-like preaching in the woods, following that report with spiritual ruminations that probably took him to the woods to pray (rather than with Jonah in shade outside of Ninevah):

Sunday, 24. I preached in the **woods** to nearly a thousand people. I was much oppressed by a cold, and felt very heavy in body and soul. Like Jonah, I went and sat down alone. I had some gracious feelings in the sacrament—others also felt the quickening power of God. I baptized a number of infants and adults, by sprinkling and by immersion. I felt my body quite weary in, but my spirit not of, the work of God.

That very year, in 1787, the MEC Americanized Wesley's directive about outdoor evangelism in their book of church law, the *Discipline*, noting all the wilderness that had already been claimed for God:

Quest[ion]. 3. What may we reasonably believe to be God's Design, in raising up the Preachers called Methodists?
Answer[er]. To reform the Continent, and spread scripture Holiness over these Lands. As a Proof hereof, we have seen in the Course of fifteen Years a great a glorious Work of God, from New-York through the Jersies [New Jersey], Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North and South Carolina, even to Georgia.

Such a purpose statement configured evangelistic success on American turf onto a spiritual plane. Woodland prayer and shaded preaching would conquer wildernesses, redeem citizenry, and reshape a continent.

**No Horrid Alarum of War
 Shall Break our Eternal Repose,
 No Sound of the Trumpet is There,
 Where Jesus's Spirit O'erflows**

All three of these spiritualizations of the woodland would eventually come together in the dramas known as camp meetings, staged revivals that became a Methodist signature, if not a Methodist creation. Camp meetings appealed to Methodists and became a programmatic feature of Methodists' outreach, in no small part, because they had for three decades gathered large crowds, often outdoors and under the trees, for their quarterly conferences or quarterly meetings. With Asbury, however, American Methodists generally experienced forested, "natural" settings as devotional retreat and/or natural cathedral. BUT they looked through the trees to a heavenly home.

Nature and the American forests figured in conflict as well as unitive spiritual home-coming. Woodland meetings proved usable for dissidents protesting Methodism's policy and practice on matters of race, gender, class and style. In several of Methodism's nineteenth-century divisions, protesters strategized in forested-camp-meetings. And late nineteenth-century Methodism reimagined and reinvented its wildernesses in a twofold manner—by Chautauqua's and Methodism's extensive, national Sunday school training and programming on the one hand and on the other by transforming the informal holiness camping into a nationally orchestrated and carefully planned campaign for denominational renewal.

ALL Glory to God in the Sky

Couldn't early Methodists see the forest for the trees? No! They saw from the forest, over the woods, through the shade to the garden in the sky. Or, perhaps they saw earth remade into a heavenly, peaceable, grace-filled realm. And in their frontier gatherings they experienced God's peaceable reign. Not stopping with justification, nor sanctification (holiness/perfection), they looked to glory and sang:

Appeased by the charms of thy grace,
We all shall in amity join,
And kindly each other embrace,
And love with a passion like thine.