

MIDDLETON FAMILY REUNION
November 24, 2013 Deidre Palmer

SERMON “By Faith” – Deidre

(From Covenanting SA – UCA - adapted)

“We acknowledge that we are on the land of the Kaurna people, the traditional custodians of this land over thousands of years. We pay respect to their tribal Elders, honour their continuing culture, and pray that we might all work together for reconciliation in this nation.”

My ancestors on my father’s side – both his mother’s and father’s side – came out on the HMS Buffalo and landed at Holdfast Bay to establish the South Australian colony.

I have great joy in knowing that the Middletons and the Broadbents contributed to the early life of South Australia and were part of the early contributors to the life of the Methodist Church.

There are memorials to them at Old Noarlunga and at Cherry Gardens Uniting church – both sides of the family are buried here: Luke Broadbent and Joseph and Elizabeth Middleton.

This is a heritage which many of us share here today.

As we gather, I imagine we are surrounded by these cloud of witnesses – Joseph and Elizabeth Middleton and their many descendants.

We gather to honour them and the legacy they have left us.

We remember their courage in coming out on a boat from England. Their willingness to travel into an unknown future and leave what was familiar behind them at great risk to themselves.

We remember Elizabeth – pregnant when she left England – the difficulties she would have endured a pregnant woman on a ship with four other children to look after: Thomas, 10; James 8, Lucy 3 years and 11 months, and William 1 year and 10 months.

And then when she arrived, to experience the grief of the child she had carried, dying soon after birth. Ian Hutchinson notes that “Had he survived he would have been the first white male to be born in the new colony.” (p.3 of Middleton Memoirs)

Joseph and Elizabeth lived in a “reed hut on the banks of the River Torrens.” in Adelaide.

Joseph and Elizabeth lived in a “reed hut on the banks of the River Torrens.” in Adelaide.

We also read further in the history that Joseph and Elizabeth lost the land that they had in Wright Street, because there was a famine in 1840 and he had to exchange it for a bag of flour” (p. 3 of Middleton Memoirs)

We remember the way God sustained them in this journey and their ongoing faith through grief and deprivation and struggle to survive.

Joseph and Elizabeth Middleton are among the 15 names of the Wesleyan Methodist Society, which was established on the 11th of May, 1837

“It was the first organization of a church in the colony” (“The History of Wesleyan Methodism in South Australia from Its Commencement to its jubilee, by Rev. James Haslam. 1958)

We get the impression from reading the history of South Australian Methodist that our ancestors were determined, strong people, who were dedicated to establishing a Christian community that would nurture the faith of the early settlers of the colony.

James Haslam comments:

“It is pleasantly interesting to note the successive steps of these zealous people in their work of establishing that form of Christianity which had become dear to them. In the first instance, they waited not for any ecclesiastical authority. They were too self-reliant, possessed too keen a sense of personal need, and had too deep a conviction of their responsibility, to be satisfied by merely forwarding a request to England or Sydney, and then waiting the issue.

They acted promptly and with confidence, and also with a discretion which showed that God have given unto them the spirit of wisdom.”

The church met for a brief time in Joseph’s and Elizabeth’s house

First met in house of Mr Giles Abbott, then in the hut of Mr Wickham and then at William Croxall’s.

“After this the preaching place was transferred to the residence of Mr. Middleton, an old English Methodist. Mr. Middleton’s house was another of the Buffalo Row series, but it proved altogether too small for the growing congregation of earnest and devout worshippers; and as a more commodious place was not at that time available the services had to be held in the open air. Soon afterwards, however, a large store room, erected by the South Australian Company was placed at the disposal of this energetic band and in that services were held until it was required for storage purposes, when the congregation again adjourned outside.”

The Middletons donated 10 shillings toward the building of the First Wesleyan Methodist Chapel here in South Australia situated in Hindley street. Built predominantly by voluntary labour.

The early Methodist pioneers were concerned about educating the young.

Even before the chapel was built, they started a Sunday School in the nearby house of Mr Scott and then in the house of Mr. Middleton.

Joseph and Elizabeth and their family moved to Cherry Gardens in April 1841.

They contributed to the establishment of the Methodist church in this region.

They were part of the community that built this house of worship which was opened in March 1849 debt free. (From Ian Hutchinson’s Middleton Memoirs)

Having faith in God inspires us to be courageous. Courageous like Abraham and Sarah – leaving their familiar home and traveling into the unknown, because of their trust in the God who called them.

If we were continuing a new chapter in the litany of faith that we hear in Hebrews chapter 11, we might say

By Faith Joseph and Elizabeth Middleton set out from England into an unknown future

By Faith, the early settlers of the South Australian colony shaped the Wesleyan Methodist church

By faith, the people of the Uniting Church continue to engage in Australian society, embodying God's vision of reconciliation and justice

Here in Cherry Gardens and this region: By faith, this community continues to be a witness to the hope and compassion of God.

Christian faith is based in the nature of God – a God who is loving, compassionate and reconciling - a God who is trustworthy.

In the midst of a context where we may be unsure of who we can truly trust, the author of Hebrews speaks to us today and assures us – this God is trustworthy – this God is faithful – this God is the one who opens up a new way of living for us – through Jesus Christ.

We can trust God – because God loves us beyond your wildest imaginings. God has a vision of our world that God is bringing to reality – we haven't quite got there yet – but there are signs and glimpses of God's New Creation all around us.

As we gather together this afternoon, we are reminded again of God's love for Joseph and Elizabeth and their children and that early Christian Community in South Australia. We are also reminded of God's faithfulness to the covenant God has made with us as the people of God. We remember that God gives us the gift of the Spirit so we will not lose our way.

The author of Hebrews notes that we base our faith in a conviction about things not seen.

In a post-modern world, that is a courageous (or some would say, foolish, or delusional thing to do).

Arthur Van Seters in his commentary on the Hebrews text notes:

“What Israel discovered from Abraham was that faith did not depend on evidence

but on the sense that God is the source of promise and hope..” (p.342 Preaching God’s Transforming Justice”)

Faith is grounded in experience – of a God who loves us infinitely, who is always with us and for us.

It is grounded in conviction – of the faithfulness and trustworthiness of God.

It is grounded in a community which carries forward and embodies this story of a faithful, loving God. Joseph and Elizabeth Middleton were part of a Christian community which carried for us the story of God’s reconciling love for us.

And this story has been continued into the present day in the Cherry Gardens Uniting Church and in us, as we become bearers of God’s hope and love for the world.

For the community that received the letter to the Hebrews, the word that came to them was intended to encourage them. (p. 364 Women’s Bible Commentary) The community to whom this book is addressed was going through a difficult time.

Later in this chapter it describes the sufferings those who had faith, had endured – the persecution and oppression. It also describes what they were able to overcome and live through, because of faith.

“(in the 3rd section of the book) Beginning with a series of examples of those whose faith is attested by scripture, it is almost entirely an exhortation to go forward on ‘the new and living way opened’ up by Christ.” (p.364 Women’s Bible Commentary)

Faith makes it possible for us to do **extraordinary** things

Like– Abraham and Sarah, like Joseph and Elizabeth – leaving the familiar and going into the unknown.

With God we can do extraordinary things – like bring healing and reconciliation to our country through a Covenant with Aboriginal people. We can bring love and hope to our neighbourhoods and relationships. We can participate in God's mission in the world and the whole creation.

Faith also makes it possible for us to live our **ordinary** lives

Faith got me out of bed this morning, into the car and brought me here.

Faith had me get on a plane and go to a city I'd never been to before and move our whole family to begin a life there – working as a Christian educator, educating people for ministry in the church.

Faith is an adventure in trusting God. And as we place our faith in God, God invites our response.

As we honour our ancestors today, the same God who inspired and sustained them, invites us to be part of the ordinary and extraordinary adventure of faith.