

# **“THE BELL, THE BELLS, THE ROCK, THE TILT, THE FIRE, THE CHURCH”**

A Sermon Preached at the First Parish in Wayland, Mass.  
on December 10, 2000  
by the Rev. Kenneth Sawyer

I have been meeting with some of the newer folks among us the past few Wednesday evenings. The final meeting will be this Wednesday. [Our ministerial intern] Tom Rosiello and Kimi [Riegel, our associate minister] will be there, too, and some of our longer-time members. We'll get to know each other a bit better, and how First Parish works, and something about the history of this institution.

Anyone is welcome to join us, downstairs at 7:45. Before the evening is over, I will give another of my guided tours of this building, including a visit to the temporarily bell-free belfry. Walking around, I get to relating some of the tales of the church's life here since the building was dedicated back on January 25, 1815, the same day they installed their new minister, John Burt Wight, during whose ministry the church would sign on with the newly-formed American Unitarian Association in 1828, the same year eighteen members of the congregation pulled out to form the Orthodox Congregational Church, now the Trinitarian Church across the street.

Before it was even time to do so, I started telling some of these tales last week. They just bubble up in me, and I do apologize to those of you who are tempted to say, "If he tells us one more time about John Burt Wight, the horsehair sofa, or the first singing of 'It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,' I may join the Trinitarians myself."

I do try to restrain myself, but some of the tales need to be retold every now and then, and not just to the few who come to the newcomers group, but even here on Sunday morning every five or ten years, selectively, of course, and varying the combination each time.

Because as I've argued before at greater length, neither a denomination nor a local church is defined just by its professed beliefs, its ecclesiastical structure, and its orders of service. It has its stories, the way that a family does, too. It has its memory of special characters and events.

(If you will permit me a tangent, I will say again that a denomination has its beliefs as well. I am more aware of this since one of you, Bob Mainer, told me about a website, [speakout.com](http://speakout.com), where one can take a test to determine what religion he or she might find most fitting, based only on the person's beliefs. Bob had taken the test, and it told him he should be a Unitarian Universalist, which he is.

I also took the test, which was a little scary, since being a UU is not just my affiliation but my livelihood. I told them what I believed about god, the afterlife, evolution, nature and the like, and they gave me a long list of religions, with a score of zero to 100, 100 being the religion that "shares more of [my] selected beliefs than the others." It turns out they think that I, too, am a Unitarian Universalist, based on just my beliefs.

I am not imagining that their little test will list Unitarian Universalism first for all of us, because our beliefs are so fascinatingly diverse, though I am guessing it ought to finish pretty near the top for most of us.) But our religious life would be so much the poorer if it were just about beliefs, and not about the ways that life plays itself out among actual people, in gathered congregations, as they – as we -- go about the memorable and the mundane together.

As it happens, today we are in the midst of at least three memorable events in the making, as well as one important anniversary. The story of our life as a congregation will henceforth include the stories of the bell, the bells, and the rock, not to mention the room.

The bell is the one that hung in our belfry for 185 years, calling people to worship, tolling the news of deaths in the parish, and for the last 150 years, announcing the hours. For those who don't know, it developed cracks between the body of the bell and the claw-like "part of the bell by which it is hung," which is how my dictionary defines the word cannon.

Luckily, this was spotted by Charlie Anderson, or the body of the bell might have come down through. Instead, it was put on a wooden platform while people, led by Katie Nazarian, figured out what to do with it. There were many theories, ranging from, it can't be fixed, to, I know this guy who can fix anything. The answer turned out to be a company in Cincinnati that makes and fixes bells, and that's where ours has been shipped.

A crowd gathered to watch the bell come down, and we'll try to get the word out when, in three or four months, the crane returns to put it back up, ready to ring again, looking like new. One hundred-eighty-five years from now, people up admiring the bell will be told, actually, it hasn't always been here. There was this one time it had to be fixed, taken down by crane, and sent off to Ohio ... just as I tell people how, in 1814, they got the bell up there in the first place, using oxen and pulleys.

These are among the tales of the tower, along with the tilt. The tilt is a recurring tale, because every now and then, someone sitting at the intersection out front, facing south, waiting for the light to change, will think they see that the steeple isn't quite vertical. This is not a happy thought, and it can lead to another visit from the surveyor who certifies that actually, it's about as straight up as can be ... except the one time in the '20s he determined that by gosh, it really was tilting to one side. Which is why, if you come with me on Wednesday evening up into the belfry, you'll see a lot of steel up there, which is what actually provides the support.

You'll also see that here and there, the girders are blackened, a reminder of the fire not long after the steel went in, started by workers repairing the roof and spreading along the ceiling up into the belfry. Legend has it that the fire was contained largely through the bravery of one firefighter who had attended Sunday school here, and been the most difficult child in class.

The story of the year the bell traveled to Cincinnati will be added to our collective memory book, and so will remembrances to come of the bells, the Areen Memorial Handbells that we will dedicate this afternoon at the 3:00 handbell concert. The bells were a gift to the church from David and Tricia Marshall in honor of Tricia's parents. Our thanks go to them and to our music director, Polly Oliver, who is ready to lead a handbell choir of our own, which you are all invited to join. Thanks, too, to Tom Rosiello for helping out. From now on, the rich musical life of the First Parish will be even richer, and there will be another way of getting involved in the church, even in music, even if you don't enjoy singing.

We have come a long way from the early days of the parish, when the only music was the unaccompanied singing of the psalms, with the congregation responding line by line to the singing of a leader. But a lot of things were different then: there were two-hour sermons morning and afternoon, forty-minute prayers, all in an unheated building. Gradually, things evolved. Heating was added in 1828, dual furnaces in the vestibule. In 1797, the town bought a bass viol to accompany the singing, and then an organ in 1831. And now we have an organ, a grand piano, and handbells. What would the Puritans have made of that!

A third memorable event is only weeks away, decades in arriving. It has to do with our most famous recorded memory, the account by Catherine Jewett Coolidge Tatnall of the first time that the hymn, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," was sung. Ms. Tatnall related this anecdote long ago, and we repeat it now and then, although we don't always include the last two sentences.

"During my girlhood in Wayland, the people of the town had a keen and devoted interest in the activities of the First Parish Church and the affairs of the church were common topics for conversation.

"I remember many precious traditions of this dignified old parish, but one in particular appealed to my girlish fancy as being very dramatic and picturesque, so that it has always been a memory.

“It was a story told by some older member of the church, when calling upon our family. It related to the first singing of Mr. Sears' Christmas carol (sometimes called ‘The Angels' Song’), beginning, ‘It came upon the midnight clear.’

“At the time it was written, Mr. Sears was living in a house on Plain Road in what is now the Tower Hill district of Wayland. He sent word out among his parishioners that he had written a new Christmas hymn which he would like to have the people try out at his home on Christmas Eve. So, from here and there about the town they came over the snow in their sleighs to sing, for the first time, this glorious carol, which is now sung throughout the world!

“The only spinet in town was brought to Mr. Sears' house on a horse sled” from Abel Glezen's home on Training Field Road.

“A choir was chosen from the assemblage and the beautiful words of the hymn sung to the quaint accompaniment of the spinet.”

And these are the last two sentences:

“This house was later burned to the ground but the foundation can still be seen.

“It is still my cherished wish that The First Parish of Wayland may sometime, on this site, place a tablet marking the spot where this imperishable song was written.”

One of our members, Irene Praeger, isn't here on Sunday mornings these days, because she is now the Director of Religious Education at our church in Needham. But until this year, she was our Religious Education Administrator, and as one of her last missions in that job she arranged to have Ms. Tatnall's cherished wish finally fulfilled.

Every week the children contribute to the church, just as we do. A part of that goes to an outside charity, and a part goes to the support of the church. The children's contribution to the church this past year went to buy a plaque (or tablet, if you will) and a stone upon which to mount it. The stone will sit on the public land (a heater piece) at the intersection of Plain and Claypit Hill Roads here in Wayland.

Pecky Abbott, who took over Irene's job this year, has steered the project to its completion. It was she who discovered, in her dealings with the town, why an odd little bit of public land like the one where our rock will sit is called a heater piece – it's because on a map these little triangles look like the devices once used to heat up irons.

On December 24, we will gather here, adults and children, for a somewhat-abbreviated worship service, after which we will drive up to dedicate the tablet, at long last, in tribute to Mr. Sears' accomplishment.

By the way, I should mention to anyone who is fairly new, this fits into another story we like to tell here, how that hour of such international impact came in the unfolding of Sears' own life. Sears had been the minister here for a few years at the start of his career; but showing promise, he had been won away by what was then a more prosperous, prestigious congregation in Lancaster, Mass.

At the end of seven years there, a mental and physical breakdown forced his resignation, and he came back to Wayland to recuperate, preaching a bit to this congregation, which was between ministers at the time. Eventually, Sears would feel well enough to accept a call to return to the regular ministry of this church for a second time, which he served well in the years leading up to the Civil War, after which he served as the minister in Weston. The chapel there is named in his memory, and there is a display of Sears memorabilia.

By the end, he was a minister of considerable note, honored for his poetry, his sermons, his fierce support of the Abolitionist cause, but best remembered, even more so today, for the words to "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," written at just that time when his own fortunes seemed least bright.

A final note about that hymn, for those who have not yet experienced a Christmas at First Parish: We sing it a lot. At the Community Carol Sing on the front lawn this afternoon, and at the morning service and both evening services on the 24th, every year, every time we gather and sing, the final hymn is our own. Thank goodness it is so good.

So that explains the three momentous events at hand: the bell, the bells, and the rock. But what about the anniversary? It is of this room. It is of our place of weekly worship, the scene of our memorial services and funerals, our weddings and child dedications. This room was dedicated and first put into use 150 years and a few weeks ago.

The meetinghouse itself, the congregation's fifth, is older still, as I mentioned before, having been dedicated in January of 1815. But the floor under your feet today was not there then. Except for the vestibule, there was just one big room, with a gallery along three walls, the pulpit perched on posts, and the congregation in box pews down on what is now the vestry floor, organized by family (whereas before this building, they were divided by sex).

In 1815, this was still the town church, the only one. The minister was a town employee. Church and state in Massachusetts were separated only in 1833. But by mid-century, the church, now disestablished, and in a town that was not growing, was ready to cut down on the number of empty seats on Sunday by parting with its galleries, in the process creating nice space downstairs for lectures, social events, and church school. That was done in 1850, along with a number of other changes, like two new furnaces, mahogany arms for the pews, carpeting, the slate roof, hymn-books for the choir, and the addition of the steeple clock, provided by local businessmen and actually the property of the town.

Not all of the changes were ultimately successful or permanent. Victorian style did not favor Puritan or even federal simplicity. This pulpit was put in storage in the basement, replaced by a larger one of dark wood, surrounded at least on occasion by potted ferns and palms. Your white pews became apparent mahogany, too, through the use of paint that to the end, over a generation later, on warm, humid Sunday mornings, would cause worshippers to stick to their pews.

Behind the pulpit was a long couch, now in the vestry, originally stuffed with horsehair. Behind that, on the wall, the palladian window was plastered over and in its place was painted a ten-foot cross, which appeared to cast a shadow onto the recess behind it, all an illusion created by the painting technique of trompe l'oeil, trick of the eye, in which shades of paint are used to create the appearance of three-dimensional spaces on flat walls. The trick was repeated on the other walls.

By the 1890's, tastes had changed again, and there was money and excitement enough after the church's revival following the railroad's arrival in town in 1881 to undertake another renovation; so the cross, the shadowing, the palms, and even the pulpit were gone, the pulpit replaced by this, the original, retrieved from the basement. In a final rejection of Victorian taste, the exterior of the meetinghouse was changed from yellow-brown to white, which it has remained.

But much about our worship space owes its beauty and utility to the efforts of those who designed it 150 years ago. The Building Committee was made up of two Heards, a Draper, and a Damon, all from long-present families in town and all men, of course. Their full report is included in the history of this meetinghouse that John Seiler wrote for a collection of essays that Betty Sweitzer assembled back in 1980.

The report includes the list of \$2617 of expenditures, like the \$13.30 for the numbers on the ends of the pews along the central aisle. It also includes their earnest hope for the room's success:

“Your committee have been deeply sensible, from the commencement of the project, that, though of comparatively small pecuniary magnitude, yet it was one of great importance; - not only to individuals, but to the parish as a whole: - that, if successfully carried out would essentially aid in creating and sustaining a permanent interest in its welfare, and in the advancement of those Religious Principles which we hold dear and sacred.”

As we add our tales to the church's ongoing narrative – the bell, the bells, the rock, and beyond -- may we do as well.