

We are Asbury(1): Abundantly Thankful to God!
Psalm 136: 1-9

Name!

As you know, I am a lectionary preacher. But this is a new year and I would like to do something new. Instead of following the lectionary text, I will do a sermon series, “We are Asbury!” and reflect on our mission statement. Knowing our identity is important. To know someone, we first need to know their name. Do you know my name? My name is Yohan. Someone calls me “Yohen” but I am “Yohan.” Do you know the meaning of my name? If you don’t know, it’s o.k. because I didn’t know it either until Advent last year. My father named me after the apostle John. John in Korean is Yohan. So, I just thought that my name was a biblical name, but during our Advent book study, I learned that John in the Hebrew means “God is gracious!” Then, I knew the true meaning of my name! Our name is more than just a word. It tells us about our parent’s wishes for us.

To know who we are as Asbury UMC, we begin with our name, Asbury. Do you know where our church’s name came from? Francis Asbury, the first bishop of American Methodism. Have you seen him? If you want to see him, go to the narthex and turn to your left and you will see him there. Why did the founders of our church name our church Asbury? Maybe, Becky’s grandfather knows or some of your grandparents know. I believe that they named our church after Francis Asbury because they wanted our church to have the profound spirituality of this simple and pious person with exceptional leadership and passion.

Asbury! Far from impressive!

Asbury was born in England in 1745. His family background was far from impressive. Asbury was the son of working-class parents and his family had some issues. His father had a drinking problem and his mother struggled with deep depression. The financial condition of his family was not good so Asbury had to go to work at age 12. Asbury’s educational background was far from impressive. As we know, John Wesley was an Oxford-educated intellectual. He was Rev. Dr. John Wesley. But Asbury was not educated beyond the sixth grade. Many early Methodists preachers like John Wesley and George Whitefield were known for their exceptional preaching that elicited emotional responses from their listeners. But Asbury’s preaching was far from impressive. He was well known for disjointed sermons that were nearly impossible to follow, and people generally didn’t find Asbury’s preaching “edifying.” Simply put, he was a bad preacher. But under his leadership, American Methodism grew at a remarkable rate, rising from 600 members to more than 214,000 members. Quite impressive! Asbury was one of the common people just like us or maybe less than average. But he did exceptional work because of one thing, his love for God.

Before he journeyed to the American colony, he wrote in his journal, “Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honour? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: I am going to live to God, and to bring others so to do.” His love for God and people in his heart was like a powerful engine that produced immense energy and kept him moving. When he first got to America, most preachers were unwilling to leave the cities because traveling outside the cities was unpleasant and even dangerous. But he pushed his horse twenty miles out of the city to preach and visit other villages. Gradually he formed a ‘preaching circuit,’ and his preaching circuit grew wider and wider each year. He rode at least one hundred thirty thousand miles by horse and spread the gospel. I love traveling but I would not dare to try what

Asbury did. Because of his wide and frequent travels to the most remote parts of the frontier, according to Wiggers, more people would recognize Asbury on the street than Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. The founders of our beloved Asbury UMC might have wanted our church to be like Asbury whose love and passion for God were quite exceptional.

Desiring God

As we face this year ahead, I hope that we remember Asbury and his love for God. We don't have to be extraordinary people to do exceptional work for God. Just like Asbury, you are good enough to do God's work. The only thing we need is a yearning for God! Desiring the presence of God! Many people, including Christians, have lost their yearning for God.

There is a story about a Jewish rabbi and a mystic. Once, a famous doctor met one of his patients on the street. Without a word of greeting, the doctor said, "I told you not to walk on that leg until it heals!" The man replied, "But it IS healed." The doctor doubted it and said, "Impossible! I saw the wound in your leg. It will take months to heal!" The man said, "I went to another kind of healer, doctor. I went to a mystical rabbi, the one they call the Baal Shem Tov." The doctor narrowed his eyes, then simply walked away.

A week later, the doctor went to Baal Shem Tov's house and rapped loudly on his door. When the door opened, he said, "I hear you claim to be a healer!" The Baal Shem Tov looked at his visitor and replied, "God is the healer, my friend." Then, the doctor said, "Let us examine each other. Whoever best diagnoses the sickness of the other will be proved the better doctor." The rabbi smiled and said, "as you wish." And the doctor began his examination of the Baal Shem Tov. The doctor poked him, pinched him, gazed in his ears, and tapped on his knees. After an hour, the doctor said, "You have no sickness that I can find."

The rabbi said, "I am not surprised that you could not find it. I so desire the presence of God that my heart cries out in pain when I cannot feel it. My sickness is this constant yearning for God." The Baal Shem Tov looked at the doctor a long while and said, "Let me now examine you."

The rabbi took the doctor's hands and gazed into his eyes. At last the rabbi said, "Have you ever lost something very valuable?" "As a matter of fact," said the doctor, "I once had a large diamond, but it was stolen from me." "Ah! That is your sickness!" said the Baal Shem Tov. "What? Missing my diamond?" the doctor answered. "No. My sickness is yearning after God. Your sickness is that you have forgotten that you ever had that desire." So many people have forgotten that they once had a yearning for God. At the beginning of 2023, think about if we earnestly yearn for God. Loving God! Desiring God! That's all we need to do remarkable work for God.

John Wesley once said, "Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on Earth."

Asbury was a person who passionately loved God and desired nothing but God. That was enough for him to carry out his extraordinary work of God.

We can love God because God loves us first. In our churchyard, there are dogwood trees and I like their flowers. Dogwood flower bloom when spring comes. Spring brings warmth and a gentle breeze that awakens the flowers in the buds. Like spring, God's love enables us to love God and bloom our love for God. God says to us, "I want to do with you what spring does with cherry trees." The more we remember and experience the love of God for us, the more we can love God and our neighbors with grateful hearts.

Abundantly Thankful to God

I believe you know our mission statement. “We are Asbury! Abundantly Thankful to God.” We are thankful to God because of God’s love. The Psalmist sings his gratitude for God’s love. Let us responsively read Psalm 136.

Leader: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever.
Leader: 2 Give thanks to the God of gods,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever.
Leader: 3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 4 to him who alone does great wonders,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 5 to him who by understanding made the heavens,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 6 to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 7 to him who made the great lights,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 8 the sun to rule over the day,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 24 and rescued us from our foes,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever;
Leader: 25 he who gives food to all flesh,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever.
Leader: 26 Give thanks to the God of heaven,
People: for his steadfast love endures forever.

My Asbury family. We are Asbury. Abundantly Thankful to God for his steadfast love that endures forever. Feel God’s love and love God. Let God’s love bloom the flower of love in you this year. Amen.