

Happy Anniversary Brethren

“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because he will save His people from their sins.” Matthew 1:21 NIV

To those of us in the Brethren family which trace our common beginnings to the 1708 baptism in the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany, a special anniversary is just upon us! The 300th Anniversary of the first Brethren baptisms in America on Christmas Day 1723 in the Wissahickon Creek in Philadelphia!

All the Brethren had not yet migrated from Germany including founder and leader Alexander Mack. The 20 Brethren families who had arrived in 1719 had scattered into Pennsylvania at William Penn’s invitation to carve out new lives and new farms. But the church in America had not yet taken root. Life was hard, there was much to do to build new lives in this new land. But in 1722 a revival spirit spread through the Brethren, and as 1723 rolls on six souls have asked for baptism.

The Brethren meet at the home of Peter Becker on Christmas day 1723. It is the official organization of the first Brethren congregation in America, the Germantown congregation which exists to this day as an active congregation meeting in the original meetinghouse built in 1770. Since Alexander Mack is still in Germany the congregation elects Becker as its elder. Twenty-three persons leave about noon to walk the 1½ miles to the property of John Gomorry by the Wissahickon Creek. There is snow on the ground and ice on the creek. Martin Grove Brumbaugh, Brethren minister and Pennsylvania Governor (1915-1919), in his classic work, *A History Of The German Baptist Brethren In Europe And America*, (© 1899, Brethren Publishing House) shares a touching account of that Christmas 300 years ago. It was a very different time for these brothers & sisters who had given up everything to leave their homeland Germany to come to this new land. Imagine...

Doubly memorable Christmas day, 1723! Christ’s anniversary and the date of the birth of His church in America! There is an activity at Peter Becker’s house in Germantown. The spindles are still; and the voice of praise is

raised. Six persons, Martin Urner, his wife Catherine, Henry Landis, his wife, Frederick Lang, and John Mayle ... were in the midst of seventeen members, they were preparing to hold the first immersion in the church in America. There was no ordained minister this side of Atlantic. The members hold a council. Peter Becker is chosen to act as elder. The preliminary examination is held, prayer is offered, and then these twenty-three souls walk out into the winter afternoon, in single file, headed by Peter Becker. They journey to the Wissahickon Creek. The group kneels. Overhead the solemn sentinels of the forest fastness – the pines and hemlock are stilled. The ice-bound stream utters strangely solemn music. ... Peter Becker's voice breaks the stillness. The prayer is ended. The six candidates for membership in God's family are led one by one into the water and are baptized by trine immersion. ... They assembled in the house of John Gomorry. It is evening now. The old-time tallow-dips are lighted. They gather around a long table, a hymn is sung, and in the silent evening hour, with no witness but God, and curious children, these people begin the observation of the ordinances of God's house on Christmas evening, 1723. The sisters on one side, the brethren on the other, arise and wash one another's feet. Then they eat the Lord's Supper, pass the kiss of charity with the right hand of fellowship, partake of Holy Communion, sing a hymn and go out. It is night! But under God's guidance their acts have been repeated in a thousand twilights, in all parts of this country in all the years that have come and gone; and please God, we will repeat them again and again until He shall say, 'It is enough. Come up higher.' ... Seated in their midst were the six new members, twenty-three in all. Who can lift the veil and record this hour's holy service? What thoughts, what emotions. What religious experiences, what covenanted pledges, what rejoicings, moved lips and heart and head! To God only is known the ecstasy of that communion. 'Ye know not now; but ye shall know hereafter.' Blessed beginning of the church in America; may her latter days be like her first! The congregation was now organized. The Spirit of the Master was upon them.

These dear ones had left everything to come to America. They had worked hard, starting with nothing, to build new lives here on the frontier of Penn's Woods. It was a very different time. No homes covered in Christmas lights. No homes filled with brightly wrapped store bought Christmas

presents. No comfortable churches hosting Christmas pageants with robe clad children as the first Christmas shepherds. These sisters & brothers brought to Christmas what they had. A devotion ... a covenant ... to be Christ's church. Obedient to the Scriptures. And to love the lost to Jesus! They long referred to those six dear souls baptized that Christmas day as the "first fruits" of the Brethren in America.

As we approach Christmas 2023 our lives are so different! Busy! Full! Blessed! And Christmas is bright, loud and busy! But some things are not so different. As the people called Brethren we still bring what we have. A devotion ... a covenant ... to be Christ's church. Obedient to the Scriptures. And to love the lost to Jesus!

And from the waters of the Eder to the Wissahickon to the baptismal waters of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, Tennessee, West Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, North Carolina, Kansas, Indiana, California, Puerto Rico, Nigeria, Tanzania, Rwanda, Congo, Guatemala ... wherever the Brethren gather to welcome new dear ones into the Kingdom ... there is amazing joy!

Indeed on Christmas Day 2023 a young man named Miller, a college senior, has requested Christmas Day immersion baptism in the Conodoguinet Creek, Mechanicsburg, PA, into a small Brethren congregation, into the Brethren, into the Kingdom! And thus the covenant continues! We share the Good news of Jesus that many may know that Jesus still saves from sin! Happy Birthday Jesus! And happy anniversary blessings Brethren everywhere!

Celebrating! Pastor Larry M. Dentler

Sources consulted regarding the first baptism in America:

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