

07.13.25 Worship Service

Morning Prayer –

Creator God, we thank you for all your gifts of Creation – for the planets and stars, the universes and black holes, for the parts of creation that we can see and for the mysteries that we can neither see nor know completely.

We thank you God for harvest that is complete, for the grain that's been gathered as well as what's been left behind. We pray for those who are still harvesting, for their safety and perseverance.

We're grateful, God, for safe travels and the return of those who were at camp and at convention. We continue to pray for those who are traveling in the coming days that they would be granted safety and times of rest and rejuvenation.

God, we pray for those who are struggling with health concerns. Be with each one in their own circumstances, with their physicians and therapists, technicians and caregivers. Work through your Holy Spirit to give healing and comfort, courage and strength for each day.

We pray for search teams and the rescue workers in Texas who continue their grueling work of searching for those who are still missing after the floods. Loving God, surround those who are frustrated, angry and grieving losses of loved ones, homes, possessions. Hear their cries; give them comfort.

We pray for those who are fearful of being targeted or detained unjustly. Give us courage, God, to advocate as we're able and as we're called, for those who need help. Give us wisdom and creativity to respond to what we see going on in the world with hope and humility.

Be with us now and bless us as we continue to worship you by giving our offerings and tithes. Amen.

2025-07-13 - Looking through Someone Else's Lenses – Indigenous Voices 3 Sermon – Pastor Lois Harder

This is the third in the four-Sunday series called “Telling a Different Story: Land, Faith and Indigenous Justice”. It's a worship resource that was created and then shared by the Madison Mennonite Church in Wisconsin – a congregation that was started in the late 1980's. Their suggestion for this third session is to tell the story of Anabaptist beginnings along with stories of how our particular congregation came to be. They gave prompts like, “Does your faith community have roots in a particular European migration? When was your church founded?” Then, they suggested that a second story line be told alongside of the congregation's – the “broader, concurrent geopolitical story of what was happening in the area. For example, when was the land ‘opened’ to European settlers? How soon did Euro-American Mennonite immigrant churches follow? From whom was the land purchased, and what was happening in the surrounding community at the same time?”

For a younger congregation like the one in Madison it doesn't take very long to describe a 35 or 40 year story. But, as you might recall we were blessed to spend all of last year, 2024, telling the 150-year old story of how we came to be here in rural Goessel, KS. Each month last year there

was a wonderful event planned to help us remember and review the stories of how our forebears arrived here in 1874.

The quick summary goes something like this. Our roots go back to the Dutch Anabaptists of the 16th century. In the mid 17th century they migrated to Przechowko, West Prussia – which is now Poland. They migrated again in the early 19th century to the Mennonite Molotschna Colony in South Russia as they continued to seek religious freedom which included exemption from military service because they understood the central tenet of Jesus’ teachings to resist violence. It was on that journey that they became known as the Alexanderwohl congregation and village. This happened when Kaiser Alexander wished them well – wohl, in German. Thus, the name Alexanderwohl came to be. Then, in 1874, under the leadership of two strong pastor elders the whole church community, about 800 people, boarded two ships called the *Cimbria* and the *Teutonia* and they all migrated together to North America. After 18 days on the ocean, they landed in New York and from there they continued west and settled in Kansas and Nebraska.

The large group was hosted by the Santa Fe railroad for a month in Topeka, KS while they purchased horses, cattle, farm implements, building materials and food staples – all the things they’d need to establish themselves in a new place. According to a report from the Topeka Commonwealth on October 15, 1874:

One of the largest bona fide land sales ever made in [Kansas](#), perhaps in America, has just been concluded by the [Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad](#) Company with a community of [Russian Mennonites](#) who landed in New York during the month of September... and most of whom have spent the last thirty days and a good many of their rubles in our city. Their land purchase amounts in round numbers to about 100 thousand acres (400 km²) of railroad land, aside from a number of improved farms, all lying north of the sections of [Florence](#), [Peabody](#), [Walton](#), [Newton](#), [Halstead](#), [Burton](#), and [Hutchinson](#). ... From the [Cottonwood River](#) to the [Little Arkansas River](#) ... is now one colony, composed of the thriftiest and most intelligent class of foreigners that ever landed upon our shores; and 'in three years'—to use the language of one of their elders—'that ocean of grass will be transformed into an ocean of waving fields of grain, just as we left our [Molotschna](#) colony.' Kansas will be to America what the country of the Black Sea of Azov is now to Europe—her wheat field.^[6]

This newspaper writer’s description makes it all seem kind of exciting and romantic. But the decision to leave Russia and come to North America was not an easy one – and it didn’t happen quickly. There were meetings, discussions, scouts, prayers, there was the dispossession of entire households, the preparations that had to be made, getting permission and passports. There were tearful farewells, sadness and uncertainty about where and when or if they would see one another again for those staying behind. The journey itself was arduous, long and risky. And once they arrived there were houses and barns to build, ground to break and work, households to re-establish, children to keep alive and safe. It might have been exciting, but it doesn’t seem like it was very “romantic”. It was hard.

But these were hardworking, resourceful and faithful people. Their faith in God was strong and a central focus in their lives. They were determined to make these new farms and fields as productive and beautiful as the ones they’d left behind in Russia. A few of them also felt strongly, out of their deep faith perspective, that they were called, in this new place, to not only share the good news of the Gospel, but also to try to build relationships of trust and good will with “the natives”, as they were then called.

In that period of time, in Protestant circles, there was a heightened sense of pietism, a strong emphasis on mission and evangelism. It was a time of new beginnings in a new land, a time when convictions ran strong and deep, when possibilities and potential seemed limitless, like the western frontier. Most of the Mennonites, however, with the history of their martyr forebears in their memory, and all the emigrating they had done in the past century, preferred to live in their newly settled, quiet villages, separate from the rest of the world, and not draw attention to themselves. But there were a few from Alexanderwohl and other Mennonite congregations who felt a strong missionary call and were quite involved with outreach to the native peoples in the “Indian Territory” (now Oklahoma), particularly those from the Arapaho, Cheyenne and Hopi tribes.

Although it seems that these zealous missionaries had good intentions and were genuinely trying to do what they thought was in the best interest of the native peoples, it was complicated. Neither peoples knew much about the other, and the U.S. government and military were still very much in the process of colonizing and exterminating the Indigenous people – to make room for the European immigrants. The irony is bitter.

There was seemingly a fascination with the Indian culture on the part of some Mennonites and in some cases strong and trusting relationships were formed. But yet there didn’t seem to be an interest or willingness on the part of the Mennonites to protest or advocate for the native peoples as land and culture continued to be stripped from them. The Mennonites ran three Indian Schools for the children, two of them in Oklahoma and one in Halstead, KS. As Kris Schmucker observed (and with her permission), “It’s hard to know how to think about the Indian Industrial Schools. Today we can see how very, VERY harmful they were. However, at that time, in that place... the intent was good. Even at that time,” she goes on, “I think it was recognized that the Mennonite run schools were slightly different (than others). They really thought they were helping the children. This was a mission just like any other. Yes the goal was to ‘save souls’ but also there was a very strong emphasis on teaching life skills like farming, sewing, things considered useful by Mennonites. They just couldn’t see beyond their white European noses to value a different way. We can’t put our values of today on the people of the past. Now we know better. It was still wrong, but their intent wasn’t to be harmful. We have to hold this uneasy tension recognizing the harm that was done by our ancestors, not with intent, but still deep, lasting harm... Now that we know better, we must do better.” Thanks, Kris. I agree. By the way, I want to acknowledge that Kris and Judy Unruh and Brian Stucky have done countless HOURS of research on the Indigenous people that lived in this area – if you’re curious and would like to learn more, they would be excellent people to talk to.

Now... to look at this same time frame through someone else’s lenses, I’d like to share with you some snippets from a book called *The Arapaho Way; A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood*, written by Althea Bass, as told to her by Carl Sweezy, a member of the Arapaho tribe. His stories take place in roughly the same time frame that our forebears were arriving. He said:

“I have never known the date of my birth, and I never had a birthday party in my childhood. This was true of all Indian children that I knew... and did not mean that our parents were lacking in love and attention toward us, but only that they knew nothing about dates and had no way of recording them. They usually gave a feast when a new baby was named and one when he first

began to walk...White people have looked into our school records and tell me I was probably born in 1881, because they find me listed as a child of seven at the Mennonite Mission School in 1888. But I do not know the month or the date of my birth.”

Here he’s talking about becoming farmers: “When we first sat down on the Reservation, the Agents and those who directed them in Washington expected all the Arapaho men to become farmers. There was plenty of rich land, and they expected each man to choose ground wherever he wanted it within our boundaries and settle down. But the Arapaho had always lived in bands, with their tipis side by side, their horses grazing together, and with hunting and fighting and feasting and worship all carried on by the group. It took years to learn to settle down on a farm and work alone and see one’s neighbors only once in a while. Neither we nor our dogs nor our ponies understood this new way of the white people. To us it seemed unsociable and lonely, and not the way people were meant to live.”

Here’s a memory he had of the Mennonite school at Darlington: “Since my mother had died when I was quite small, I was taken in at the Mennonite school at Darlington, which was in the charge of the Reverend S. S. Haury... The Mennonites were of German descent, and were thorough and orderly and systematic about everything they did... Some of the Mennonites spoke German and sang German songs and hymns. Some of the Indian students there, good at books and at languages, learned to talk German and to read and write German script. For fun, they sometimes sent letters in that language back to people on the Reservation. Any letter, to an Indian on the Reservation, was something important, but a letter in German was something to talk about for a long time. To be able to write it was an accomplishment for a Cheyenne or an Arapaho...”

And finally, this short piece about religion: “We Arapaho have always been a religious people. We had never built churches and held regular services in them, as white people did, and we had no book of sacred writings like the Bible, no prayer books and no hymnals. We had no fixed holy days and no Sabbath, no Thanksgiving Day feast and no Christmas. And when we first learned about Christmas, some of our children got the Baby Jesus and Santa Claus confused in their minds. For these reasons, it was hard for white people who lived among us to realize how important our religion was to us; it was hard for them to understand that everything we owned and every act of our lives was in some way connected with our religion.

All creation had a place in our religious beliefs. We believed in a power that was higher than all people and all the created world, and we called this power the Man-Above. We believed in some power in the world that governed everything that grew, and called this power Mother-Earth. We believed in the power of the Sun, and the Night-Sun or Moon, of the Morning Star, and of the Four Old Men who direct the winds and the rains and the seasons and give us the breath of life. We believed that everything created is holy and has some part in the power that is over all.”

In the last chapter of her book *So We & Our Children May Live*, Sarah Augustine offers us this timely challenge: “... is it possible to imagine different systems? Can we imagine systems that are consistent with the Reality of creation, of systems that meet the needs of everyone within ecological limits? Do not live in fear,” she writes, “We must find the courage to acknowledge Reality glimmering everywhere around us, embodied by the Creator. And we must have the

courage to join together to imagine, create, and construct, with hope and humility, systems that pursue life.” Amen.

Resources:

So We & Our Children May Live: Following Jesus in Confronting the Climate Crisis by Sarah Augustine and Sheri Hostetler

The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of An Indian Boyhood by Althea Bass as told to her by Carl Sweezy

A People of Mission: A History of General Conference Mennonite Overseas Missions by James C. Juhnke

The Story of Alexanderwohl, Second Edition: Celebrating 125 Years by David C. Wedel

Benediction –

Creator, we give you thanks for all you are and all you have brought to us within your creation.

In Jesus, you place the gospel in the center of our lives – through him all creation is related.

You show us the way to live a generous and compassionate life.

Give us your strength to live together with respect and commitment as we grow in your Spirit, for you are God, now and forever. Amen.