*Anniversary Sunday 2021*

Many of you have already heard about the beginnings of the Congregational Church here in the Salt Lake Valley, but there is an earlier history. The National Association of Congregational Churches was prepared to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the pilgrims landing at “Plimouth” – a plan interrupted by the pandemic. Our story actually begins even before Pilgrims landed on the shores of the New World. What prompted the people to make a treacherous journey across the ocean to the wilderness of the New World? We name a time of upheaval in the Christian tradition “the Reformation” which is often associated with Martin Luther, but there were numerous other questioners or reformers in that time too. Prior to that time the Catholic church had dominance, but when seeds of dissent were planted and questions arose about authority and Biblical interpretation, various groups began to form saying that it was the Bible and not the Pope they looked to as authority. One such group of dissenters arose in England, pushing back against the Anglican Church. These people met in homes or even in farm fields - against the laws of the time. They were persecuted and some of their leaders killed so a group sought refuge in the Netherlands – led by John Robinson. After a time there, they began to be concerned that their children were becoming “Dutch” as well as for their own religious freedom so a group of them decided to seek a home in the ‘new land’. It is said that they planned to join the colony established in Virginia, but after an arduous journey they instead made landfall at the end of Cape Cod in November 1620. Before stepping ashore at the safe harbor they had found, they drafted an agreement as the basis for the government of their colony. The Mayflower Compact was the first written agreement in history of a social contract – people agreeing among themselves to form a state.

We know those early days were harsh with half of the original 102 persons succumbing in that first winter. Eventually more people joined them. They also made connection with other Puritans who had come to this new land and had made their home in Boston. By covenanting together, they formed new churches in the area – the beginnings of the Congregational Church. One of the values these people had brought with them was the importance of education and they especially wanted to maintain educated clergy. Hence, one of the things they established were places of higher learning. One was a college at Cambridge (now known as Harvard), and another in New Haven – Yale. A succession of educated clergy provided strong leadership for churches and the communities.

That early covenant read:

“Believing in Jesus Christ, the Interpreter of God to humankind, we accept his teachings as the guiding principles of our lives and consecrate ourselves and our church to their fulfillment. We, therefore, join in covenant, with one another, to worship, work, and serve together that we may express through our church and our individual lives the love and faith taught by Jesus Christ.”

It is thought that this early covenant became the basis for our Constitution. Some other ideas grew up in churches around that time – the abolition of slavery and the elevation of the status of women. By 1789 there are records that indicate Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth spoke in churches around New England. So it shouldn’t come as a surprise that a young woman who had studied with her male counterparts sought to be ordained to ministry too. We know there had been women like Anne Hutchinson, who preached much earlier but Antoinette Brown was the first to be ordained in 1853.

Another event that reflected these concerns happened in 1839. A slave ship named Amistad was found off Long Island, New York by a U.S. brig. Aboard the Amistad, a Spanish ship, were a group of Africans who had been captured and sold illegally as slaves in Cuba. The enslaved Africans had revolted at sea and won control of the ship. When the U.S authorities seized control of the ship there began a legal and diplomatic battle that brought the explosive issue of slavery to the fore.

When the revolt happened at sea, one of the Africans, Cinque, managed to unshackle himself and his fellow captives. They killed the Spanish Captain and the cook, but needing help with navigation, they took two of this ships crew and ordered them to take them back to Africa. Those crew would change the ship’s course at night and ended up sailing through the Caribbean and then up the east coast of the United States. When the U. S. brig located them, they were off the coast of Long Island and they brought them in to the harbor of New Haven, Connecticut. Several Congregational clergy became aware of the crew members who were imprisoned there in New Haven but when they tried to communicate with them they were hampered by language. There was a professor at Yale, Josiah Gibbs, a philologist, that they enlisted to determine what language the Africans spoke. Gibbs went to the waterfront in New York and searched for anyone who recognized the language, eventually locating a Mende speaker who could interpret for the Africans which allowed them to tell their own story.

This is an incredible story – the churches raised the money for the legal defense of these African men. They hired former President, John Quincy Adams who was known as a strong antislavery voice in Congress, to lead the defense. Adams maintained that the heart of the case was the willingness of the United States to stand up for the ideals upon which the country was founded – that every man has an inalienable right to life and liberty. The case went before the Supreme Court in 1841, and eventually Cinque and the 34 surviving men were freed and returned to their homeland. The abolitionists raise the money for their return. (This story was made into a film several years ago.)

Our congregational heritage is rich with stories that remind us of the foundation upon which our churches are built. These are but a few but I hope they offer incentive to learn more – and perhaps a challenge to find the ways our faith engages with the world around us.