

In Commemoration of the Dedication of the Church on October 29, 1818

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The Year There Was No Summer

Context is often incredibly interesting. Flat facts gain dimension with the world around them. Sometimes the relationship between fact and context is evident, other times not. All too often, we pare away the context and cling to the fact, as though that alone were enough.

The **Year Without A Summer**, also known as the **Poverty Year**, was 1816, in which severe summer climate abnormalities destroyed crops in Northern Europe, the American Northeast and eastern Canada. It has been called the “last great subsistence crisis in the Western world.” It is believed to have been caused by a volcanic winter, resulting from the eruptions of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in April of 1815. This eruption was the largest the world had seen in 1,600 years.

In May of 1816, frost killed most of the crops that had been planted, and, in June, two large snow storms in Canada and the US resulted in many human deaths. The result was widespread localized famines, and further deaths from those who, in a hunger-weakened state, then succumbed to disease. The winter of 1817 was bitterly cold.

After that terrible summer, in the midst of its consequences, some prominent Baltimoreans called the leading liberal religious thinker of the day, Dr. James Freeman, to Baltimore to tell them about this new religious perspective called Unitarianism. He preached four times in October.

Just over three months later, a meeting was held on February 10, 1817, in the home of Henry Payson, where the determination was made to found a Unitarian church. This is the date we commemorate each year with our Founders’ Day observation.

Maximilian Godefroy was first commissioned to design a more modest building at a different location. But by April, 1817, the large amount of interest

shown in the enterprise seemed to warrant a larger building. So, with characteristic Unitarian optimism, the architect was directed to plan a larger building and a different site was selected. There was some complaint about the location, since many members lived farther south near the harbor, but it proved to be a fortunate choice, because the great Baltimore fire of 1904 destroyed all the churches south of Saratoga Street.

On June 5, 1817, the cornerstone of the Church was laid. In it was placed a brass plate bearing the following words, “Unto the King Eternal, Invisible, the only Wise God. I Tim. 1-17 (in Greek). In the forty-first year of the United States, this cornerstone of the First Independent Church of Baltimore was laid...”

After sixteen months, on October 29, 1818, the First Independent Church, founded as “Unitarian Christian” , though not completely finished, was dedicated with Dr. Freeman preaching the dedicatory sermon. A newspaper the following day reported, “The Church was filled at an early hour...and the concourse of persons who were excluded was very great. We have been promised, and as soon as received, shall present to our readers a correct description of this most splendid edifice, the interior elegance of which is superior to any church in this country, and equaled by few in any other.”

To cure the problem of acoustics in the Church, a reconstruction of the auditorium of the Church was undertaken in the early 1890’s. The architect, Joseph E. Sperry, presented a plan which would retain many of the architectural features of the original design and preserve its beauty. The alterations were completed in 1893 and the Church celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary with a Rededication Service on October 29, 1893.

The Rededication Service highlighted the courage of the early Unitarians and the importance of the *Baltimore Sermon*, preached by William Ellery Channing in 1819 at the ordination of the first minister, Jared Sparks. At the service, the Church’s sixth minister, Rev. Charles R. Weld, said, “Seventy-five years ago, to be a Unitarian meant uncommon personal courage, painful research and discriminating learning.” At the same occasion, Rev. Grindall Reynolds, Secretary of the American Unitarian Association, said

What [Channing] believed to be most wise and most likely to promote the sway of pure Christianity was that large tolerance, which could permit all to remain in the common fold, and with absolute freedom speak the truth as they found it written in the Bible, in the universe and on the tablets of the human heart.

But whatever its author wished or thought to be wise, the Baltimore Sermon was the last in a long chain of causes which created the Unitarian denomination.

The antiquarian can point out in the last century, ministers who worshipped God after the manner men call heresy, and celebrated men, not a few, like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson who followed in their footsteps...As surely as the followers of Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch, so they, that held to the strict unity of God, the real nobility of the human nature and the inward and spiritual character of true salvation, were called Unitarians at Baltimore. If, therefore, we have any structure which may properly be called a memorial building, it is the very one in which we are now gathered.

What prompted the founders of our church in that cold, dark summer and fall of 1816 to reach toward Unitarianism? We may never know for sure. What is certain is that in a time of calamity, they reached toward reason and enlightenment, toward a faith which would allow them to question and explore and look for truths beyond the readily apparent.

Behind the vaulted ceiling at the base of the dome, there are four triangular pendentives, each with a bas relief, representing the various emblems of peace, tolerance, fortitude, and union and, uniting with them, the allegory of time winging its way toward eternity.

Peace. Tolerance. Fortitude. Union. These are, indeed, a strong foundation. They are emblematic of the vision the founders had for the Church and the history which has ensued from that founding. We do well to remember them in our own difficult times as we observe the 190th year since the dedication of our church.