

**“Born and Born Anew”**

**Sermon for the 320th Anniversary of King’s Chapel**

**The Rev. Earl K. Holt III, Minister**

**June 18, 2006**



## **BORN AND BORN ANEW**

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Delivered in King's Chapel  
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*"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."  
- John 3:3*

Of the tens of thousands of visitors who enter this church each year, I suspect that relatively few pause to notice the words of the old plaque located just to the right of the front doors, which read: "King's Chapel, Founded 1686. Its first building was the first Church of England in Boston. The cornerstone of the present building was laid August 11, 1749. After the Revolution it became the first Unitarian church in the United States." That is the short and uncomplicated summary of a considerably longer and much more complicated story, but it does highlight one unique feature of the history of King's Chapel, that this church has not one but two birth stories, separated by a century, that it was born and born anew. And both times amid considerable controversy.

Today we celebrate the 320th anniversary of the church's original founding on May 15, 1686 as an Anglican church, a congregation of the established Church of England. The Commonwealth was then of course the Massachusetts Bay Colony, part of the British Empire. Boston and the surrounding towns were settled by the Puritans who had come here from England for one primary reason, to escape from the influence and especially the worship of the Anglican church, which they deemed corrupt. So not surprisingly, they looked upon the establishment of the King's Chapel — of an Anglican church in a Puritan city — as an affront, which it was perhaps intended to be. A more benign and tolerant interpretation would be to say that the British soldiers and colonial officials who resided in Boston ought to be provided with a place to worship according to their own familiar customs and practice. And in fact the Commission of King James II to the Royal Governor of the colony (Sir Edmund Andros) stressed exactly this point: "...for the greater ease and satisfaction of our loving subjects in matters of religion, we do hereby will and require and command that liberty of conscience be allowed all persons, and that such especially as shall be conformable to the rites of the Church of England be particularly countenanced and encouraged." However, the Puritan's understanding of freedom of religion did not extend that far. In fact it didn't extend very far at all. Tolerance was not their strong suit. It has been famously observed that the Puritans came to New England to worship as they chose — and to deny the same privilege to everyone else. In its origins King's Chapel existed in uneasy relationship to most of the surrounding citizenry.

But leap forward almost a century and conditions were radically changed. On March 17, 1776, the British were evacuated from Boston under threat of arms by the colonial army led by General George Washington, a date we celebrate in Boston now as a public holiday, Evacuation Day. A large minority, but still it was a minority of the families of King's Chapel, including its Minister, Henry Caner, were Tories; they considered themselves "Patriots", that is Loyalists to King and Crown, and they were forced to leave Boston at that time along with the British troops, some of them returning to England, many moving to Nova Scotia. The Rev. Dr. Caner was 77 years old and had served as Minister here just short of 30 years, eventful years which included the erection of this present building. In fact, it is to Henry Caner, the last Anglican Minister of King's Chapel, that primary credit belongs for the building of this place. Like many of his parishioners forced to leave, he had given a significant part of his life to this city and to this church. Caner left in our parish records what may seem to us in hindsight an amusing note, but it contains a reminder of what might well have been, had history taken a different course than it did. He wrote, "An unnatural Rebellion of the Colonies against his Majesties [sic] Government obliged

the Loyal Part of his subjects to evacuate their Dwellings and Substance, and to take refuge in Halifax, London, and elsewhere; By which means the public worship at King's Chapel became suspended, and is likely to remain so, till it shall please God in the Course of his Providence to change the hearts of the Rebels, or give Success to his Majesties arms for suppressing the rebellion.”

The worship of King's Chapel was in fact suspended for a time, but when it recommenced it was under far different circumstances than Dr. Caner anticipated or could have imagined. After the Revolution King's Chapel had its second birth, and even took at this time a new name, being re-christened the Stone Chapel, to remove associations with the monarchy. And so it was called for many years, before the original name was re-adopted, but with the understanding that it referred not to any earthly ruler, but rather to the one Lord and God, the King of Kings. Here is one of many symbols of what has been strikingly consistent in the history of this place: a deep respect for tradition and regard for the past, for what has been, that it not be forgotten or lost in the rush of passing events. It is a characteristic dramatically at odds with the prevailing ethos of America with its bias toward change and whatever seems different or new — a conservative and conserving instinct and a concern that the good of times past not to be lost to the future. As the famous President of Harvard University, Charles William Eliot, who grew up in this church, said in an Address delivered here at the time of our 200th anniversary in 1886, “The world could not spare its adventurers and pioneers; but for one pioneer it needs a thousand conservers, in order that all the good the past has won or the present wins may be held fast and safely transmitted....This church is a conserver.”

This characteristic is manifested in a variety of ways, most concretely and visibly in the sanctuary itself, which has been maintained essentially unaltered for two and a half centuries. So it is in that in this familiar, unchanging setting the prayers of worshippers over many generations, who sat here as we do now in the serene beauty of this space and knelt for Communion before this Chancel, commingle with our own today. And by God's grace and by our faithfulness and stewardship it will be similarly conserved for the future, to generations yet unborn.

The same spirit is manifested in our Prayerbook. In the revisions it has undergone over the past two centuries much more has been retained than has been altered or removed. It contains some of the oldest prayers in the English language, collects which have been read here continuously in the worship of King's Chapel since its founding.

So it is rather remarkable, and somewhat ironic, that this conserving and conservative church should be credited as the first in the new nation to formally embrace the emergent new liberal Christian theology of the 18th century which eventually took the name Unitarian. And in fact no one here planned or intended for it to happen. Rather, it unfolded through a series of steps, as the church was born anew after the Revolutionary War.

Not long after Evacuation Day in 1776 this building was opened again for regular Sunday worship, but for the use of another congregation. It was lent for the use of the congregation of the Old South church, whose nearby building had been desecrated by the British as a riding stable for their troops, which worshipped here for five years before their own meetinghouse was finally restored. King's Chapel then found itself in an anomalous position. They had no minister and only the tiny semblance of a congregation. A member of King's Chapel in 1782 recalled later that not more than a dozen families belonged to the church at that time. And as an Anglican congregation they required a Bishop to Ordain their Minister, but in the flush of new-found independence they were estranged from their erstwhile Bishop in London.

To make a very long story short, they called a recent graduate of the Divinity School at Harvard named James Freeman to serve the church -- not as Minister, since he was not Ordained -- but as Lay Reader, for an initial trial period of six months.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously stated that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. This is surely an overstatement, but to the extent that it is true there is little argument that for King's Chapel that one man would be James Freeman. Not as its founder, an event that took 73 years before his birth, but rather its re-founder, when the church was born anew.

Freeman himself was born in nearby Charlestown in 1759. His mother was Lois and his father had the wonderful name of Constant Freeman. His early education took place in the shadow of King's Chapel at the Public Latin School, for which of course School Street is named. He graduated from Harvard at the age of 18, in 1777. He showed no particular early interest in theology, and was modest about his proficiency as a scholar, though according to the testimony of others he was an excellent mathematician, very learned in geography and history, "and could read with ease and pleasure [in] Latin, French, Italian and Spanish" -- as well as presumably English.

His personal modesty was a notable element of his character, and he apparently possessed as well a remarkable serenity in his bearing, reflecting a deep inward serenity of soul. "I have enjoyed a great deal in this world," he would often say, "a great deal more than I deserve." In old age, his health broken and living with much pain, he said to a friend, "My life has been a very happy one; I have suffered nothing." This in looking back upon a life which contained no small measure of controversy as well as accomplishment, including the divisive years of the Revolutionary War, during which he drilled troops on Cape Cod and while rescuing members of his family to Quebec in 1780, he was taken a prisoner, confined and on parole for some two years. It was upon his return from this experience that he began to preach.

His theological training was mainly informal, carried out by borrowing books from the libraries of friends. It was perhaps the fact that he was significantly self-taught theologically that led to his freedom from conventional doctrines and his independence in establishing his own.

After the congregation of Old South church returned to their restored Meetinghouse, in the fall of 1782, Mr. Freeman was invited by a letter from the wardens of King's Chapel to officiate at the church for the six-month trial as reader. According the terms of this agreement, the expectation was that he would mainly recite the sermons of others — a practice which would certainly cut down on the work load — but from the beginning Freeman mainly chose to write his own. When the six months had passed he was formally named pastor of the church, at the age of twenty-four, beginning a ministry which would extend for 53 years.

In accepting his original appointment, Mr. Freeman stipulated only one condition, the liberty to omit the reading of the Athanasian Creed. At first, this omission was sufficient, but before long the new minister began to be troubled by other elements of the liturgy, in particular those referring or implying belief in the doctrine of the Trinity.

This led to a great inward trial of conscience for the young pastor. In time he came to feel he had no choice but to resign his post. According to his admirer and later successor in this pulpit, Francis Greenwood, he would come into the homes of parishioners who were among his closest friends, and say, "I must leave you. Much as I love you, I must leave you. I cannot conscientiously perform the service of this church any longer, as it now stands."

But in the end friendship and affection trumped theology, in a way in which I believe Christ would approve, and which eventuated not just in an immediate happy result for those directly involved but in momentous if unforeseen consequences that would ultimately redound far beyond the walls of this church.

The proposal was made that Mr. Freeman declare openly his doctrinal concerns and difficulties in a series of sermons, setting his case before his people, and then let them judge whether they were such as should require a separation between the congregation and its minister. From this pulpit he did so for several Sundays, but all the while expecting that though some might agree with him, he could hardly hope for general approval. He nonetheless felt relief in the opportunity to speak his mind and heart, fully and freely, relieved in conscience, and he was heard with patience and attention; though even as he did so he prepared himself to resign his position. However, as it turned out the greater number of his hearers proved responsive to his arguments and voted to alter their liturgy and retain their pastor, the first vote coming on the 20th of February, 1785, a date which may be considered at least as important in the history of King's Chapel as the date of its original founding.

In what have become the famous words of Mr. Greenwood, rendered in a memorial at the time of his death: "Thus did Mr. Freeman, by following the dictates of his reason and conscience, become the first preacher in this country of what he held to be a purified Christian faith; and thus through the means of his mental integrity and powers of exposition, did the First Episcopal Church in New England, become the First Unitarian Church in the New World."

The decision which this congregation and its minister made together then, met with resistance and active opposition which was overcome by their continuing faithfulness and courage, without which King's Chapel might not exist today, at least not as the bastion of free conscience and liberal Christianity that it is and which was established by James Freeman and his congregation in their consequential actions more than two centuries ago. We are what we are today because of them.

The inscription beneath the bust of James Freeman here in our chancel reads in part: "In theological attainments there were few, and in the qualities which endear a minister to his people, there were none to surpass him." It is a tribute any minister would welcome.

Our Anniversary Sunday frequently falls on Father's Day. James Freeman had no children of his own, but he is effectively the father of this church. And like most fathers his greatest influence was not so much that of his particular ideas or deeds but the influence of his character. Most of what we do and say is forgotten. Character abides. In the long run of time what we do matters less than who we are. His memorial behind me in the chancel refers to Mr. Freeman's Christian simplicity, purity and faithfulness, the benevolence of his heart, and the benignity of his manners, to his courageous honesty and the firmness with which he maintained his opinions, and to his mildness and affectionate sympathy.

I believe that these and other elements of his character, infused into this congregation at a crucial moment in its history, endure here in this place which is his lengthened shadow. Long may it be so. Let us continue to honor freedom of conscience and expression in his spirit; and let us seek for honesty, openness and candor in all that we do. James Freeman had in high degree the capacity for forbearance and forgiveness and looked for the best in everyone; let us do the same. Let us follow the example of his generosity to others and modesty regarding himself. Let us have trust in one another, as our "departed father" did, and may we attain to a trust like his in him who is the Father of us all.

Near the end of his life, contemplating death, James Freeman said to his closest friends; "Let no one say when I am dead that I trusted in my own merits. My own merits are nothing. I trust only in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ."

Living in the legacy of his spirit, may we aspire to that same trust -- in faith, in hope and in love.

**King's Chapel**

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