**Our God Goes with Us**

**May 21, 2023 Asian Heritage Month, Easter 7**

Micah 6: 1-8 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Acts 10: 34-43

Our sermon today is provided by David Kai, retired Diaconal Minister and musician. David’s wife was in my year of ministry training at the Centre for Christian Studies and he started the year after us.

During our message today, we will be singing parts of the hymn “Our God Goes with Us.” This hymn was written for the Centennial-Japanese United Church in Toronto on the occasion of their move from their church building. In this hymn, the work of the Spirit is depicted in Japanese-Canadian history and the ongoing story that led to the formation of the Toronto Japanese United Church and its eventual amalgamation with the Centennial United Church. The chorus affirms that no matter where we go and whatever the future holds, we need not fear, for God goes with us and before us. Let us begin by singing the chorus, first verse, and chorus of “Our God Goes with Us.”

Hymn: “Our God Goes with Us” (chorus, verse 1, and chorus)

The story of the Japanese-Canadian United Churches begins on the west coast of Canada. God was with the new immigrants as the Spirit “blew boats across the sea,” and they came to a strange, new land starting in the latter part of the 19th century. God was with the Methodist Church that took to heart our reading from Acts that tells us that all people are acceptable to God and valued as God’s children. The Methodist Church, one of the precursors of The United Church of Canada, established missions to the new Canadians in the growing “Japantown” on the east side of Vancouver. A congregation was established at the Powell Street Methodist Church, later called the Powell Street United Church. Many Japanese-Canadians were receptive to the Christian message, and also grateful for the help with lodgings, education, and other practical matters that the ministers and mission workers provided. As the population grew, other Japanese-language churches were established in the greater Vancouver area.

However, as the community grew, it still faced many barriers based on race. People of Japanese ancestry, whether born in Canada or not, were not given the right to vote or to enter many professions. Schools were segregated for many years. Racist and opportunistic politicians were more than willing to make Asians the scapegoat of economic or social problems. The Second World War gave them the opportunity to rid themselves of what they considered “The Japanese Problem.”

Hymn: “Our God Goes with Us” (verse 2 and chorus)

Soon after the declaration of war with Japan, an exclusion zone for Japanese-Canadians was established from the coast to 100 miles inland. Their boats, cars, houses, businesses, and properties were confiscated and never returned. Families gathered from outside the Vancouver area were housed in the squalid conditions of the animal stalls of the Pacific National Exhibition grounds while awaiting transfer. Adult males were sent to work camps to build roads, many of them in northern Ontario. Some opted to stay together as families and work in the harsh conditions of sugar beet farms in the prairies, while the rest were to be sent to hastily built internment camps and ghost towns. Taking only what possessions they could carry, Japanese-Canadians were herded onto trains headed to the interior of British Columbia. Encouraged by the United Church, there was some attempt to keep people of similar religion and denomination together for the sake of cohesion and leadership within the community. Some internment centres had a larger proportion of Buddhist and Anglican church members, while others like Lemon Creek and Kaslo had a larger number of United Church members and adherents.

God was with them not only in spirit but also through the United Church presence in the persons of ministers such as the Reverends Kosaburo Shimizu and Takashi Komiyama, and mission workers such as Constance Chappell and Neta Sadler, who came to help in the internment camps. Soon, thriving Japanese-Canadian churches were operating in camps and ghost towns such as Lemon Creek and Kaslo.

The people of the United Churches in these mountain camps and towns found their faith tempered in the crucible of the wartime years. In the United Church they found safe, sacred spaces and created loving communities that continued long after they were dispersed, becoming the foundation of Japanese-Canadian United Churches in cities across Canada. And so the mountains became a holy place, a place where faith grew and blossomed in spite of, or perhaps in part due to, the troubled times the internees experienced. As the hymn states,

*In lonely mountain paths our God was found,*

*Faith, hope and love making ghost towns holy ground.*

Hymn: “Our God Goes with Us” (verse 3 and chorus)

With the end of the war, the internees faced another unjust ultimatum: move east of the Rockies or face deportation to Japan. The majority gravitated to larger centres like Toronto, Montreal, Hamilton, and Winnipeg. As internees left the ghost towns and camps, United Church deaconesses and ministers assisted them in finding housing, employment, and church connections in new cities. In their new surroundings, Japanese-Canadians in general sought to become as assimilated and integrated as possible. They did not try to establish ethnic neighbourhoods, and most adopted more Anglo-Saxon sounding nicknames. As the saying goes, “It’s the nail that sticks up that gets hit on the head.”

It was the original intention that English-speaking Japanese-Canadians should assimilate and attend their local United Churches; however, few felt comfortable doing so. As a result, English services and congregations were established for the second-generation Nisei and their Sansei children, and these churches thrived through the baby boom years. They were places not only with extended family ties but also ties with friends who had become like family; warm and safe places to be a part of and grow in faith, where one could find loving community and true sanctuary.

Hymn: “Our God Goes with Us” (verse 4 and chorus)

As the number of Nisei and Sansei members decline, the future of the Japanese-Canadian United churches is less clear. Some congregations have come up with innovative solutions. Montreal Japanese United Church has now become a multiracial, multilingual, intercultural church with members from many other cultural backgrounds joining the Japanese-Canadian founders. The Toronto Japanese United Church (Nisei) amalgamated with its co-tenant congregation, Centennial United Church, and later amalgamated with Oriole-York Mills to form the new Bayview United Church. Such innovations are a hopeful sign that the work of the Japanese-Canadian United Churches will be carried forward into the future.

Although this hymn and message has focused on the history of Japanese-Canadian United Churches, there is a message here that applies to everyone. Our God is always with us; there is nowhere we can go where God is not present. God cannot be confined to any particular building, or to one church or another; wherever we may go, God is there.

Knowing that God goes with us gives us courage and strength in the midst of difficult times. As the people of Israel escaped from Egypt, God went before them like a pillar of cloud by day, like a pillar of fire by night. There is nowhere we can go that God has not already been; the way has been prepared. Our God is ever before us, going ahead of us, ever near.

Jesus said, “I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). And so it is that “the future, still unknown, Is not to fear, we trust in God alone.”

Our God goes with us. Thanks be to God.

Hymn: “Our God Goes with Us” (chorus)