

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF DURHAM

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SESQUICENTENNIAL SNAPSHOT #5

OUR CHURCH IN CRISIS TIMES: DISTANT DRUMS OF WAR, 1937-1941

As the sun set on Rev. Scanlon's ministry (1920-1938), storm clouds gathered in Europe and Asia. The Great Depression still maintained a grip on American life and the retiring minister's successor, John Hardin Marion, Jr. (1939-1940), accordingly preached on ascendant Social Gospel themes. The rise of totalitarian forces in the world, however, loomed ever larger. In Europe, Germany led by a grievance-prone and paranoiac leader in Adolf Hitler launched a nationalistic and expansionist (Lebensraum) policy that during the 1930s swallowed one country after another in the continent's heartland. Elsewhere, Mussolini in Italy and Franco in Spain advanced the cause of Fascism. Confronting the surging authoritarian regimes were Western liberal democracies gripped by policies of appeasement and isolationism. Meanwhile, Japan, led by nationalistic militarists, signaled an intention to pursue an expansionist policy by building a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere with China and the western presence in that country an early target. The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in mid-1937 soon led to conflict with the United States occasioned by the "accidental" dive bombing attack in December of the *USS Panay* on Yangtze River patrol and then engaged in evacuating Chinese and Americans from the invading Japanese forces.



PHOTO: John Hardin Marion, Jr.

Southern Presbyterians had a significant stake in the Asian mission field encompassing Eastern China and, especially, Korea, a mission field since 1892. Korea had been annexed and renamed Chosen by Japan in 1910. Japanese ascendancy augured ill for its Christian missions as well as for those in embattled China now confronted an adversary determined to expunge all western cultural influences: missionaries, educators, and medical personnel. In Korea, missionaries supported by First Church and by church benefactor George

Washington Watts staffed a major mission station at Soonchun in the country's southwest quadrant. They, together with other Christian missionaries elsewhere on the Korean peninsula received a grim Japanese ultimatum in September, 1937: worship Shinto shrines deifying the Emperor and giving patriotic fealty to Japan. Their faith tested, they balked at such an idolatrous order. Ten station schools closed the next day.

Word of the plight of Presbyterian missionaries in Asia reached the Durham congregation during the last months of Rev. Scanlon's ministry. The Sunday bulletins then carried announcements of special offerings for the relief of the denomination's missionaries in China. Their plight and that of the Chinese people stirred the Woman's Auxiliary to launch in 1938 white cross work to be, in the words of its president, Elizabeth ("Bess") Bryant, "used in the healing of broken bodies in war-torn China." Soon, furloughed Presbyterian missionaries made their ways to First Church where they received warm welcomes awaiting them by church women who had typically developed a symbiotic relationships with church-supported foreign missionaries. Forty-year medical missionary, John F. Preston, the first beneficiary of the Watts Endowment Fund in Korea, described for the gathered women scenes of suffering and oppression that he had witnessed. His memorable presentation led President Bryant to extol his "clear picture of recent developments in Korea and . . . the danger to the [Christian] native and foreign workers there."

Rev. Marion took notice of the rising global crisis. His sermon titles in 1939 reflected the dramatically changing landscape besetting the international order. He asked, "Can we really be Neutral?" at a moment when the United States pursued neutrality in its foreign relations in the context of a domestic political fabric riven by isolationist and internationalist forces. At the same time, he addressed "God's Part in the Present Crisis." And, on the last Sunday in December 1939, with Poland crushed by the Nazi war machine, he prophetically queried: "What sort of spirit shall we face in the new year and the dark decade that 1940 seems to be ushering in?" With hope, he answered, by citing the worm-eaten fate of Herod who "gave not God the glory." [Acts 12: 23-24]. Those like Herod who "become virtual gods to their subjects and who pour contempt upon the God of Christ" and whose "flames that burn the Bibles and the martyrs flicker out amid fading embers, but the light of truth comes back with the morning sun." The Herods of the modern world would ride high in 1940, however. Denmark, Norway, Belgium and France all fell to triumphant Nazism and Britain experienced the opening of the "Blitz" that September amid well-founded fears of

a cross channel invasion. Rev. Marion acted that year to lead the Durham Committee for the Care of European Children.

By the time Rev. Edwin Kelsey Regen succeeded Rev. Marion to the pulpit at First Church in April, 1941, the United States had largely shed its neutrality posture for the tenuous status of a non-belligerent. The previous month it had begun its “lend lease” program of supplying hard-pressed allies with military equipment on a path to becoming the “arsenal of democracy.” As 1941 wore on, a veritable de facto naval war erupted in the Atlantic as naval vessels escorting convoys of “lend lease” equipment tangled with German U-boats and the *USS Reuben James* sank following a torpedo attack on Halloween.

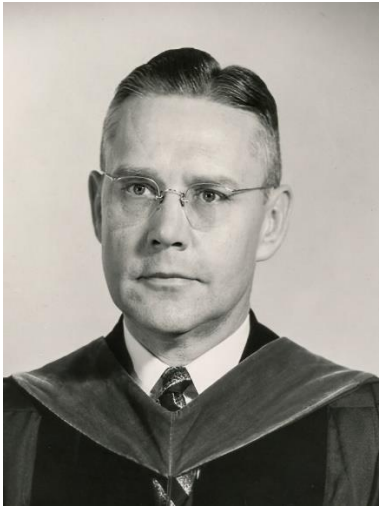


PHOTO: Edwin Kelsey Regen

Late April had found Rev. Regen, a native Tennessean, graduate of Davidson College, and of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary with Distinction in Homiletics, preaching from Acts 27:29 on the very day that Nazi troops marched into Athens. His sermon recounted the Bible story that described the fate of mariners and passengers on a ship beset by a storm at sea. Those aboard saved themselves by throwing out anchors although the vessel sank. Entitling his sermon, “Anchors for a Time of Storm,” life, he explained, was analogous to a lake or ocean, sometimes calm, sometimes stormy. All sorts of storms might strike: economic social

upheavals, political conflicts and “most dangerously of all, war, breaking out in one part of the world, spreads with uncontrollable fury of a hurricane . . . threatening everything we have dreamed of, struggled for, and achieved.” Nevertheless, upon the water’s surface “we must sail the fragile craft of our individual lives and try to bring them into some port of purpose and value and meaning and usefulness for ourselves and society.” To meet this challenge, everyone needed “strong anchors that will hold until the day breaks and the storm spends itself”

What anchors were available as the storm raged? Rev. Regen answered that five anchors existed to meet the crisis. First was “faith in the reality and sovereignty of God” Whatever transpired “in Europe or in Asia or in the Western hemisphere, whatever may be done in Berlin or Rome or Moscow or Tokyo or London or Washington --- the last word and last deed will not be theirs. The last word will be God’s.” Tapping into a Calvinistic predestination doctrine, he noted secondly that life “is an entrustment [from God] and we live under obligation.” Thirdly there existed the fact that “others need us and depend on us.” Fourth, he stressed that there existed higher, “more lasting and permanent causes in the world than ourselves.” In turn, he advised the congregation that, “we can invest our lives . . . , so that we can continue and multiply our usefulness and gain a certain amount of security.” Having listed and defined anchors three and four, he then applied them to current events. “Today when death and destruction are sweeping the seas in the form of raiders of one kind or another,” he noted that “the weak and defenseless

merchant ships are convoyed through dangerous waters by powerful fighting units, so that shielded by their strengths the merchantmen fulfill their usefulness and gain a certain degree of security.” So too did those aboard a frail craft in stormy seas when they tied their fates to a higher cause represented by thrown anchors. Finally, and fifthly was the ever present trustworthiness of Jesus and his way of living embraced by the storm-tossed voyagers who acted and thereby saved themselves.

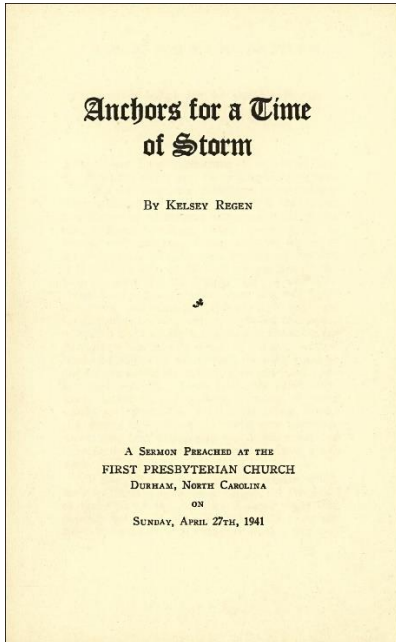


PHOTO: Sermon: “Anchors for a Time of Storm” title page

The newly called minister closed his lengthy sermon with a prayer to almighty and creator God. “[T]he ocean of our world is very great; the storms of destruction are very frightening, and the boats of our lives are very small and frail. Give to us the courage and wisdom and faith and endurance so to sail that we shall come at last into some port of Thy purpose for us and for our world.”

Months went by as the storms on the Atlantic intensified during 1941 leading President Franklin Roosevelt to declare a national emergency in May. Summer brought the crisis closer to North Carolinians when the army held maneuvers in the Sandhills. At the same time relations with Imperial Japan deteriorated. The Far East situation escalated when Japan assumed control of French Indochina and the United States countered by strengthening defenses in the Philippines and freezing Japanese assets, thereby blocking its imports of vital war resources: oil, iron, and rubber. Through the summer and fall fruitless diplomatic negotiations stumbled into late November by which time a powerful Japanese naval strike force secretly sortied for its assigned destination.

The season of Advent began late that year. At First Church, Rev. Regen planned a series of “Advent Meditations.” On the first Sunday of Advent in the last month of 1941, he drew on the Gospel of John 1:1 and entitled the meditation, “In the Beginning was the World.” In it, he called upon the Presbyterian flock seated in the pews at Roxboro and Main streets that morning to “contemplate God’s manifold revelations leading to Christ’s birth.” At the organ, music maestro William Twaddell led the choir in singing a hymn drawn from the Scottish Psalter: “God Moves in a Mysterious Way, His wonders to perform; He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.” Perhaps neither Rev. Regen’s sermon that Sunday nor the especially appropriate hymn were memorable, yet the day proved to be unforgettable. The first Sunday in Advent that year was December 7th.

By Peter Fish,
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