Sunday 05/05/24 – Panama Methodist Church

Sermon Title: "The Line of Heroes!"

New Testament Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3-5

Gospel Scripture: John 14:6

New Testament Scripture: Acts 4:12

Friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, it is such an honor and a privilege to be here with all of you this morning. I officially started as your new lead pastor here at the Panama Methodist Church this past Wednesday May 1st, and this was also the same day that I went from being an ordained United Methodist Church Elder to being an ordained Global Methodist Church Elder. This is my first official Sunday leading worship at the Panama Methodist Church.

I have always said to the churches that I have served however, as soon as the moving truck pulls in, I am your new pastor! I have done my best to be active in the church and its ministries since arriving here on Tuesday April 23rd. Since this is my first Sunday as your new pastor, I am going to tell you all a little bit about myself. To be honest though, I don't really like to talk a lot about myself when preaching, but I want you all to know a little bit about me.

Before doing this though, I want you know that while I have pastored five other churches in my twelve years as a pastor, Melissa and I have never gotten

such a loving and amazing welcome as we did here in Panama. We have always been greeted and welcomed, but never like this! I truly understand now why Pastor Steve and Stacy didn't want to leave the Panama Methodist Church, and Melissa and I feel the same way. This church, and of all of you are truly amazing people. I hope and pray that in time that I may feel worthy to be the pastor of people such as yourselves.

In my pastoral tenure up to this point, I was often sent to churches that were in trouble and needed good leadership to turn them around, but this is not the case here at the Panama Methodist Church. I believe that there will be days here that you all will teach much more through the power of the Holy Spirit, than I will ever teach you.

Today I also follow in the footsteps of a friend, a mentor, and a hero, Rev. Steve Taylor. While I have been a pastor for twelve years, people like Rev. Steve Taylor, Rev. Dr. Dave Cooke, and many others were and are good role models and encouragers for me as I went through the ministry process, when I was commissioned, and then ordained by Bishop Mark Webb in 2018. In the next week or two, I will get a second ordination certificate from Bishop Mark Webb, as an ordained Global Methodist Church pastor, and I can't wait to hang it up in the pastor's office of this church. For these reasons and many others reasons, my first sermon at the Panama Methodist Church is called "The Line of Heroes!" For as my

friend Rev. Rob Renfroe has said, “We stand in a line of heroes, and we stand on the shoulders of giants”. This Sunday I take over, for a giant of our faith, named Steve Taylor, and I am so humbled by this.

Melissa also regrets not being here today, as she has a 4-H camp weekend this weekend. Melissa has been a 4-H educator for years, and she hopes to get a position near Panama as soon as she can. We would very much appreciate your prayers around that!

With all of this said, a little bit about me. I am originally from Northern Illinois, and was born in the town of Woodstock. No, my parents were not hippies! In being from Northern Illinois I was assigned at birth being a fan of the Chicago Cubs, the Chicago Bulls, the Chicago Blackhawks, and the Chicago Bears. Do I know the start line ups of any of these teams, or their most recent records? No. So, I guess I need to go to Bills game this year and check them out huh? Are these Buffalo Bill worth going to see?

I moved to New York with mother Susan when I was ten years old, and graduated from Monroe-Woodbury High School in Orange County, NY in 1999. I then went off to SUNY Potsdam to train to be a Secondary Social Studies teacher. While there I met my beautiful wife Melissa, of almost twenty years. I taught school for a little while in different places, spent years tutoring, and spent about four years as a youth case worker, working with at risk young men in Tompkins

County, NY. Then I finally went to seminary in 2010. I attended Northeastern Seminary at Robert's Wesleyan for two years, and graduated from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio ten years ago this month.

I was first appointed by Bishop Mark Webb to serve two small churches in Adirondacks in 2012, then two medium sizes churches in Finger Lakes region. For the last six years I was the pastor of the Sidney United Methodist Church. Melissa and I were blessed to see the Holy Spirit grow all five of these churches. We were blessed with dozens of professions of faith, baptisms, new ministries, growth, missions, and increased community involvement.

I don't intend to speak a lot about the denomination that many of just came from, other than to say this, I am blessed and overjoyed to be serving in a local church and the Global Methodist Church that believes in the full authority of the scripture, and the sovereignty and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Melissa and I discerned and answered a called to serve the Panama Methodist Church and the community out of a deep love for Jesus Christ. It has also been a challenge the past two years seeing my beautiful bride mostly on weekends, due to her being the head of 4H Programming in Lewis County, NY. Due to this, I wanted to make sure that Melissa felt called to serve here too, because if she didn't, I probably wouldn't be here right now.

I remember years ago when I was attending the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. On this first day of one of our classes an older and gray-haired pastor/professor looked at whole class of us, and said something I will never forget. This pastor/professor looked at all of us seminarians and said, "I answered the call of Jesus Christ to go into the ministry 40-years ago, and my family has paid the price ever since". This pastor/professor was trying to caution us to remember that our first ministry is our families. Melissa will always be my first ministry, along with my family, but we are excited to be here. I can't wait until we can get Melissa to relocate down here!

With this introductory information, I also want to also tell you more specifically, how Melissa and I ended up here in Panama, NY. I had put in my ordination paperwork for the Global Methodist Church last fall, but didn't simply just want to go to just any appointment. Melissa and I wanted to be called by God to be wherever we were going. After a period of prayer and discernment Melissa and I knew that we were being called to come here, and we are so glad that we did. We feel so called by God to be here at the Panama Methodist Church, and we hope and pray to be here for a long time!

In fact, I still remember the day, Wednesday March 13th, 2024 when I came to interview at this church. I was about 10-15 miles away, and I was on the phone with mother Susan on my car's handsfree Bluetooth. I was behind the Presiding

Global Methodist Church Elder for this area, Rev. Dr. Dave Cooke, who was at my interview. He called shortly before we got to Panama, and I had to say, “Hey mom, I have to go, pastor Dave is calling me”.

At about 10-15 miles away from Panama, my dear sweet mother informed me that her and my step-father were on Google Maps and were scanning all of East Main Street in Panama. Now bear in mind I had never, ever, been to Panama. My mother asked me which house on East Main Street the parsonage was. I said, “Mom I have no idea, I have never been to Panama”. My mom asked me how physically big the public school here in Panama was, and I replied, “Mom I have no idea, I have never been to Panama”. My mom then asked me how big the church sanctuary was, to which I replied, “Mom I have no idea, I have never been to Panama”. My mom than asked me how big my church office was to which I replied, “Mom I have no idea, I have never been to Panama”. There were many, many, many, many more questions, to which I replied “Mom I have no idea, I have never been to Panama”. In fact, when I moved here on Tuesday April 23rd, I called my mom on the way to Panama, and she wanted to know what I was going to have for dinner. I said, “Mom my car is packed tighter than an elephant in a tube sock, and the moving truck is about an hour behind me”. To which my mother replied, “so you don’t have dinner plans”. In an effort to explain to my dear and loving

devout Christian mother Susan how was I feeling, I sent her this video in our first slide:

(Slide 1 – Jeff Foxworthy Video)

A couple of hours later, my mom messaged me on Facebook Messenger and said she had watched the video, and thought and prayed about it, and that she thinks she gets where I was coming from! My mother Susan, and my step-father Michael Therio who retired from the Chaplaincy Corps of the US Air Force, as a Master Seargent will be in church on Sunday May 26th. You can then ask my mother all about my phone call with her on my way to interview here at Panama Methodist Church. Both of them are eager to come and meet all of you!

Will also this said, I did want to have a sermon this morning, knowing that a lot of the normal first Sunday introduction stuff needed to happen. As I said earlier, my first sermon on this first Sunday as your pastor is called "The Line of Heroes!" As I did a little research on Panama Methodist Church, I found out that in 2026, this church will celebrate its 200th year anniversary. I wonder how many of you by a show of hands have been in this church for one generation? How many of you by a show of hands have been in this church for two generations? How many of you by a show of hands have been in this church for three generations? How many of you by a show of hands have been in this church for four or more generations?

In coming to Panama, and the Panama Methodist Church, I want you to know how seriously I take the legacy of this church, your families, and this community. I want you to know how seriously I take your history and your traditions. After three Pastor Steve's though, you finally got pastor named after an Apostle! The Apostle Paul. Make no mistake though, we are all here right now, because of how you have all allowed God to use you, and because of what your ancestors have done before you. I was very privileged this past Monday for Maddie Post to show me the upstairs of this building. I saw and learned some of this history of this congregation. I can't imagine the countless lives that have been transformed through our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit in this place. I can't imagine how this church has and continues to serve Panama and beyond, and how you have all done this for almost 200-years.

(Slide 2 – Methodist Circuit Rider Picture)

I was also told that this church was started by a Methodist Circuit Rider. A Methodist preacher that came on horseback with little to nothing in the 1820's. Around about 1840-1850 about 50% of Methodist Circuit Riders did not live past the age of thirty. They came, often these young eager preachers, to bring to people the gospel of Jesus Christ. They would sleep in a farmer's hay loft, eat whatever they were given to eat, and would create house churches, class meetings, band meetings, and sometimes even oversee the physical construction of a Methodist

Church. They we often exposed to the elements, some died of disease, etc. When their three-year appointment was up, they would often go back to their bishop and be reassigned to do the same. I joked once in a sermon that in some towns and cities that if the lights went out when we were walking and we tripped over something, it might just be a Methodist Church. Since these Methodist Circuit Rider preachers on horseback came to places that many didn't want to go, and so it is that we have churches like Panama Methodist Church almost two-hundred years later. These preachers believed in the authority of the Bible and in the sovereignty and Lordship of Jesus Christ. The Methodist Church grew like wild-fire. In fact, in 1850 over 34% of the United States was Methodist. So many of the old churches that you see and have seen were birthed in eras like this. They were preachers and the people of church believed in the Bible and sacrificed everything, so that the world would know the name Jesus. In fact, it became a tradition ever year at our Annual Conference gatherings for the clergy to sing the Charles Wesley hymn "And Are We Yet Alive" The first verse of the hymn "And Are We Yet Alive" says this:

1 And are we yet alive, And see each other's face? Glory and praise to Jesus give For His redeeming grace (https://hymnary.org/text/and_are_we_yet_alive).

This hymn was sung in part to celebrate another year of ministry, but it was also sung to see who survived another year. Our Methodist preachers would look around while singing "And are we yet alive, And see each other's face?" I would

have been a joy to see that some of your friends and colleagues literally survived and did not die during that year of ministry.

These are some of the heroes, as I said "We stand in a line of heroes, and we stand on the shoulders of giants" of. We are here this morning, because of their faith, there witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, because of the generations before them, because of the generations after them, and because of all of us here this morning.

Some of us are still trying to wrap our minds around the new denomination, the Global Methodist Church. I mean, why form a new denomination, anyway, right? We did so, not because we don't love everybody, as we do, not because we don't believe that all people are children of sacred worth, as we do, and not because we don't believe in treating all people with human dignity, because we do. Yet, after two-thousand years of our faith, the sacrifices, the martyrs, the Methodist Circuit Riders, your ancestors, and all of you, we realized that we need to preserve our Methodist heritage and tradition. We wanted to make sure that the same gospel that has been preached for centuries will continue to be preached, and that you will know that you pastors believe in the authority of the Bible and that Jesus is Lord of all. We went through all of this, and this church went through the process of becoming a Global Methodist Church, because "We stand in a line of heroes, and we stand on the shoulders of giants".

Friends, I cannot dishonor all of you, our ancestors, our Methodist Circuit Riders, or many of the heroes and martyrs of our faith. We are called the preach God's word, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to preach it in the simple and pure way that is has always been preached. We are called to do this in love, so that gospel might save all.

Our primary concern then is Jesus, and Melissa and I moved four hours west for Jesus. Melissa will ultimately get a new job in this area for Jesus. Rev. Steve Taylor is our new President Pro Tem of the Northeast GMC Annual Conference, for Jesus. Stacy Taylor has continued to do so much, for Jesus. We are called to do everything that we do, while loving all people, so that the world will know the name Jesus. Amen.

(Slide 3 – 1 Peter 1:3-5)

In 1 Peter 1:3-5 it says:

[3] Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, [4] and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, [5] who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Pet. 1:3-5, NRSV).

Jesus Christ and his gospel is the only hope that world has. This gospel, as Rev. Roy Miller shared with us last Sunday changes lives, saves souls, and transforms entire communities. Nothing can change us like Jesus. Nothing can turn us from sinner to saint, like Jesus Christ, and people like Rev. Steve Taylor and

myself, have been so transformed that we dedicated our lives to ensure that people know the name Jesus. You are all here today, because you love Jesus, and because you want Panama and the world to know Jesus.

As our scripture that I just 1 Peter 1:3-5 says, we are promised an inheritance through Jesus Christ. For our Lord and Savior in the King of Kings and because of this we are all princes and princesses that will inherit the greatest kingdom of all. We will live and reign with Jesus forever, and for two-thousands years this has been where the majority of the world's Christians have stood. This is where I stand, as I want to see the gospel of Jesus Christ continue to transform Panama and the world.

In our very "Post-Modern" culture however, some people have asked me how I could possibly believe that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. I often reply by saying, that this isn't just my opinion, but it is what Jesus himself said.

(Slide 4 – John 14:6)

[6] Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn. 14:6, NRSV).

We can have freedom in Christ Jesus, and we stand secure as our ancestors have for centuries that Jesus is Lord of all, that the Bible is true, and that this church will continue to worship passionately, to love extravagantly, and to witness boldly!

Well just how do we do this church?

1. **We continue to live our faith. We continue to witnesses to the love and hope found only in Jesus Christ in Panama and the world.**

2. **We continue to be engaged in ministries in church, and we consider in the near future being part of a small group or class meeting. In doing so, we can even further ensure that we are much more than a Sunday morning church. We all have seven days a week, and the more we are together as the body of Christ the stronger and deeper our faith will be. Amen!**

3. **Lastly, who are we missing?**

I remember well my first week of seminary school at Northeastern Seminary on Robert's Wesleyan campus in North Chili, NY. After my cohort of classmates all introduced themselves, our seminary president at the time, Dr. Doug Cullum gave us an unannounced homework assignment. As you can image there were a lot of groans.

Dr. Cullum than said, not to worry that we didn't have to write a paper or anything for the next week. Instead, he asked us to drive around, or to bike around, or to walk around where did our ministry. This could be in a city, a town, or in the country. It was late August/Early September, so we would probably see people washing cars, gardening, kids playing, kids riding bikes, people mowing lawns, etc. Then Dr. Cullum asked us to go back to where we live and to sit in quite room for a little while and think about what we don't see. The suffering, the brokenness, and hurt that is all around us. When we take Jesus to the world, it changes the

world, and I will do anything short of sin to bring people to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Friends, brothers and sisters in Christ, the church here this morning is strong, but there are so many people out there that need Jesus. Maybe some of us have waffled or lost nerve in our witness to our faith in Christ before. The Apostle Peter denied Jesus three times on the day of Jesus' crucifixion. Yet after the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate in two weeks, the Apostle Peter and all disciples worshipped passionately, loved extravagantly, and witnessed boldly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. By the Book of Acts 4:12:

(Slide 5 – Acts 4:12)

the Apostles Peter and John were no longer hiding. Instead, they were witnessing boldly to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As the Apostle Peter stood before the Sadducees and other leaders, he said in Acts 4:12:

[12] There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4:12, NRSV).

This hope, this love that we share in Jesus Christ is open and available to all people, if we but turn from sin and darkness and put our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. This means everyone is welcome in our church, and is welcome to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, repent of there sin, and come to Jesus.

In closing I want to tell you this story. I was preparing to start my first pastoral appointment in the Adirondacks in 2012, back when I knew everything, I

was eagerly preparing what I wanted to put in my first ever sermon as a pastor. As I was talking on the phone to my first soon to be district superintendent, he told me that he had a call on the other line, and that would call me back. About 20-30 minutes he called me and told me that a new pastor near where I was about to start had said and done some pretty hurtful things as the new pastor of a church. As a result, the SPRC chair of this church and others wanted this pastor to be removed from the church. This district superintendent though, pastored this same church about 20-30 years prior. When this district superintendent pastored this same church about 20-30 years prior, the now SPRC chair was a younger church member. This District Superintendent then told me, that he said to this now SPRC chair that he probably said and did much worse things when he pastored this church about 20-30 years ago. Yet, no one wanted him removed. Without skipping a beat, the now SPRC chair of this church agreed with him that he said and done some pretty hurtful things. She then said, "but you loved us, so we forgave you".

Well, my friends, this radically changed what my first sermon would be at every church that I have ever pastored. What I have told, six churches now on my first Sunday here at the Panama Methodist Church, is this, I love you. I love you all you. I love your children, your children's children, etc. I love your extended family. I love your neighbors. I love Panama, and the people in it. I am here to serve, not be served. I am here to be active in this church and this

community, and I want you to listen very carefully to what I am about to say to you. When you put your head on your pillow every night, I want you to know that this kid from Northern Illinois loves you and is praying for you. I want you to know that you matter, that Jesus loves you, and I am here for you and your family. You are so loved, and Melissa and I came here because of the love of Jesus Christ that we share. Since all of this true, we can truly say at the Panama Methodist Church and beyond that “We stand in a line of heroes, and we stand on the shoulders of giants”. I love you all, and amen.