"Song of the Pioneers"
A Sermon Delivered by Rev. John Balicki
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 17, 2025
St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton, Maine

"Davy, Davy Crockett king of the wild frontier"

Now I have either brought back a memory from your childhood, perhaps pleasant perhaps not, or you are sitting there wondering who in the heck is this Crockett?

So if you recognized this song, it means you, like me, were a child of the 50s, and yes as I survey the congregation I can clearly see there were people here alive in the 50s. Davy Crockett, frontier hero and pioneer of the early 19th century, was immortalized by Walt Disney in a series of TV shows in the mid-1950s. Like many other youth of the time, as a budding six-year old I had my coonskin cap, my holster and pistol (sorry everyone it was a different era). Crockett was as much legend as fact. The legends: wrestling a bear, riding an alligator, or lassoing a tornado. The facts are that he did kill many Native Americans as the nation expanded its frontier west. But also later as a member of the Tennessee legislature, he was the only member to vote against Andrew Jackson's Indian Removal Act. He was killed in the Battle of the Alamo defending it against one of the world's worst dictators, Santa Anna. Like most of us Crockett was a mixture of saint and sinner, fact and fiction, a true pioneer.

Which all is an overly long lead-in to a line from today's epistle from the Letter to the Hebrews where the author calls Jesus "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith". So how could Jesus be a pioneer and how can we possibly compare him to Davy Crockett? I certainly never heard any of my theology professors do that though a rousing chorus of "King of the Wild Frontier" might have livened up the class a little.

Pioneer translates a particularly rich Greek word, *archegos*. The *archegos* is the author, the beginner, the instigator, the impetus, the trailblazer who goes before us. Here the writer has in mind the first namesake of Jesus–Joshua, son of Nun, who scouted out the land of promise for the Hebrew people. Just so, this new Jesus has been the scout, blazing a trail through all of human existence and tested in every way like all of us, yet finding joy at the end of the suffering of the cross.

But there is more. In the context of a race, the *archegos* is the team captain. In the Greek games, the team captain would run the race and then wait at the finish line to encourage his teammates as they followed in his steps.

Our other two scriptures this morning give us more insight into what Jesus had to struggle against. Isaiah's Song of the Vineyard begins as a poem for the beloved and concludes as a judgment against God's people. The vineyard that the Lord planted represents the house of Israel, and its seedlings are the people of Judah. Despite the loving care put into the vineyard, it yielded wild grapes. The vineyard did not deserve its protective hedge or wall. The Lord had expected justice and righteousness from Israel and Judah; but instead God's people brought bloodshed and the cry of the oppressed. Thus the Lord will no longer tend the vineyard: trampled down and "overgrown with briers and thorns, it will become a wasteland". And it did. By Jesus' time, there was a lack of faith in the religious leaders of Judaism. They were in it to follow the rules for their own sake and exploited rather than served the people. Jesus the pioneer awakened everyone to a new vision of the kingdom of God, one where God's present was immediate – a kingdom of peace and justice.

And when you become a pioneer, people will object as we heard in this morning's gospel. Divison will occur, households will be divided. Families will be split apart. So maybe Jesus was a little more like Davy Crockett or any pioneer than we thought. The going was tough, new territory needed plowing, opposition was strong and eventually Jesus got put to death for being a pioneer. And not only Jesus but those early followers as well. Perhaps you thought our bulletin cover art a bit grisly. No wild animal ever attacked you from the parking lot to the church door. The Letter to the Hebrews was written during a time in which believers faced significant opposition for following the divisive Jesus. Imprisonment and government confiscation of property corroded community morale. Some people stopped meeting together. These beleaguered believers were tempted to "shrink back," to deny the faith, and to "throw away" their confidence. The author thus encouraged them to "draw near," and to persevere in "full assurance of faith" and "unswerving hope." In particular, he exhorted them to imitate the faith of the saints who had gone before them.

But what about us? Does our current religious landscape seem like somewhat of a frontier? People are no longer flocking through the front door; our country is at a point in history when it is very divided. Certainly politically but also religiously. Divisions within Christianity are occurring and not just the age-old denominational differences

but who qualifies as a "true Christian" what Christian values are most important and what is our purpose and mission.

Times aren't easy right now and where's Davy when you need him? If I was on top of my game, I would have passed out coonskin caps to everyone (fake fur of course), to remind us of our call to be pioneers and follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Maybe we need to be like Davy, maybe a little more "out there", a little bolder, the stuff of legends even. Because we need to be more of a beacon, proclaiming justice for the oppressed, peace to the brokenhearted, joy to those whose hope is diminished.

And if you are sitting there now saying, "I don't want to be a beacon or a pioneer I only want a few moments of peace", remember that Jesus is not only the pioneer of our faith but also its perfecter. Here the author of Hebrews has in mind a second namesake of Jesus – Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the first high priest after the exile. Priests perfect and complete what we lack, bringing us to our goal so that we may have full access to the presence of God. So Jesus not only calls us across the finish line but also fills in and fills out what is lacking in our faithfulness. He takes our incomplete faith and makes it whole.

So when our knees are weak and our hands drooping, when we feel worn out in the journey of faith, wondering whether we can hold on and hold out, we hear again this clarion call from Hebrews. We remember our company. We remember our contest, but above all, we remember our captain who has run this race and who beckons us home.