



## **Jabez T Sunderland**

### **Script for service**

**10/26/14**

Re-enactment by Hal Breidenbach



Good morning. My name is Jabez Sunderland and I served this congregation as minister for 20 years, from 1878-1898. I must admit that I was quite surprised when Rev. Mark Evens invited me to talk with you today as it has been a very long time since I have been in this pulpit. I see that you are no longer meeting in the beautiful stone church I had built in 1882 on State and Huron, and clearly from the number of you attending today a larger space was needed, although this building looks more to be a meeting place than a church.

Today though, I would like to expound on two weeks that had a profound effect on me and indeed changed my life.

I had reason to visit India in 1896, a trip of three months. Thanks to my connection with the Unitarian magazine, I had correspondence with a Mr. Kissor Singh in the Khasi Hills, an area located about 350 miles to the North of Calcutta, and while in India I endeavored to make a side trip to visit Mr. Singh.

My travels there were a challenge, going by rail, steamer, and in a two-wheeled horse cart. At length I arrived in Shillong, at an altitude of nearly 6000 feet. The scenery as we ascended into the mountains was a constant panorama of beauty and freshness and grandeur accented by bright mountain streams with white foamy waterfalls tumbling down the rocks.

In Shillong we had a little Unitarian school and the nucleus of a church established a few months before my arrival; and here I first took the hand of a Khasi Unitarian. Mr. Robin Roy and

several Unitarian friends came out to meet me; and present me a letter of welcome--and a little poem of welcome which they tell me the children of the Unitarian school had learned to sing. Let me at least give you the words of its conclusion:

Now let our common Motto  
Be sung in every land:  
In "Love to God and Love to Man"  
Let East and West join hand.

You may wonder how these people in the far away Khasi Hills came to be Unitarian. About sixty years prior to my visit, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists established missions among the Khasi and as early as possible provided them with an alphabet, so that they might be able to translate the Bible into the Khasi tongue.

These missions had grown and developed until now they served ten thousand converts with about two hundred village schools and quite a large number of churches.

It was among these native Trinitarian Christians that Unitarian thought first made its appearance.

Mr. Singh was educated in a Methodist Christian School as were several of the local leaders. The same experience came to them that came to so many Trinitarians in America and England, namely mental and spiritual dissatisfaction with some of the theological dogmas they had been taught, and an inability to reconcile them with reason and their own sense of right.

Mr. Singh's dissatisfaction with orthodoxy began before he ever saw a Unitarian book or tract. He found a special difficulty in accepting the doctrine of the Trinity and of the Deity of Christ which did not seem to him reasonable nor did they appear to be taught by the Bible. Mr. Singh obtained and read several of William Ellery Channing's sermons and felt at once he had found the religion his soul craved.

He enhanced his understanding of Unitarian beliefs through borrowed books and magazines, notably the Unitarian. As a result of reading the Unitarian, he wrote a letter of inquiry to its editor in America.

I was that editor and that initial inquiry led to an extended correspondence, to the sending of tracts and many American Unitarian books, to this congregation's printing of Khasi language tracts and Hymn-Books in Ann Arbor for Mr. Singh, and to obtaining other help in America which enabled him to begin establishing schools and little centers of Unitarian Worship among the Khasi people.

In the two weeks of my visit I went to several congregations within a day's walk, sometimes on foot, sometimes riding in a chair-like basket carried on a man's back. On one typical occasion I visited and preached to the congregation of Jowai. They speak of their church (or Unitarian Union) as having about 50 members. The congregation seemed to be thoroughly earnest, imbued with religious spirit, and they sang excellently.

Everywhere the people expressed their gratitude in the warmest possible manner to the Unitarians of the west for aiding them in the past and now for sending a messenger to them.

These movements prove that Unitarianism is adapted to the common people. Here is a race that is in a low stage of civilization, with no written language until one was given them by the missionaries. In all my travel of 150 miles beyond Shillong I visited villages containing not a light of glass, nor a door, not a knife or fork, not a table or chair, not a washtub or flat iron, not a loaf of bread, not a clock, not a cart or horse or milk cow. Very few of the people can read or write; they have no roads or carts or even beasts of burden but transport everything on human backs, a people very rude and simple, but sturdy, independent, and manly in character, and these people have accepted Unitarianism with considerable readiness.

I shall always look back upon my visit to the Khasi Hills with very great interest. Those two weeks gave me experiences that I would not willingly drop out of my life. I can never cease to

think of these warmhearted and earnest Khasi brothers and sisters with particular tender and affectionate regard.

Indeed, my trip to India marked a transition for me--from looking at the Indian people solely with the eyes of a missionary to looking at all people with thought of cultural exchange and political alliance. After that impressive experience I have worked less on my Unitarian mission and more on supporting the broad aspirations of the Indian people.

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*Benediction:*

To revisit some of what I told you in my final sermon in 1898, "I cannot tell you how near Ann Arbor and this society always was to the hearts of both myself and my family. No memories of our lives were cherished longer or more sacredly than those centered here. That God may guard and keep you all, and all whom you hold dear; that his arms of strength may be round about you, and his love and peace may be in your hearts; and that he may give prosperity and great usefulness to this dear church, shall ever be my prayer." Amen

*Note: The words above were mostly extracted from the writings of Jabez Sunderland. They were edited extensively to fit the constrained time requirements, but with the intent of keeping his voice as if he had written this talk.*

*From the diary of Rev. Jabez Thomas Sunderland Dec. 9, 1895 to Jan 11 1896, transcribed from the original by Rev Eva Cameron in 2002*

*The Findings of Reverend J.T. Sunderland*

*(His two Weeks Stay in the Khasi Hills of Assam, April 1896)*

*This letter is taken from a booklet of correspondences from Hajom Kissor Singh with Rev, Dr. Jabez Suderland, compiled by Hamlet Rani, great grandson of Hajom Kissor Singh.*

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*“Saved by Hope” Farewell Sermon in Ann Arbor, “A Ministry of Twenty Years in Ann Arbor, Michigan,” collection of sermons and pamphlets by Jabez T. Sunderland*

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