Universalism Crosses the Pond

John Murray brings Universalism to North America
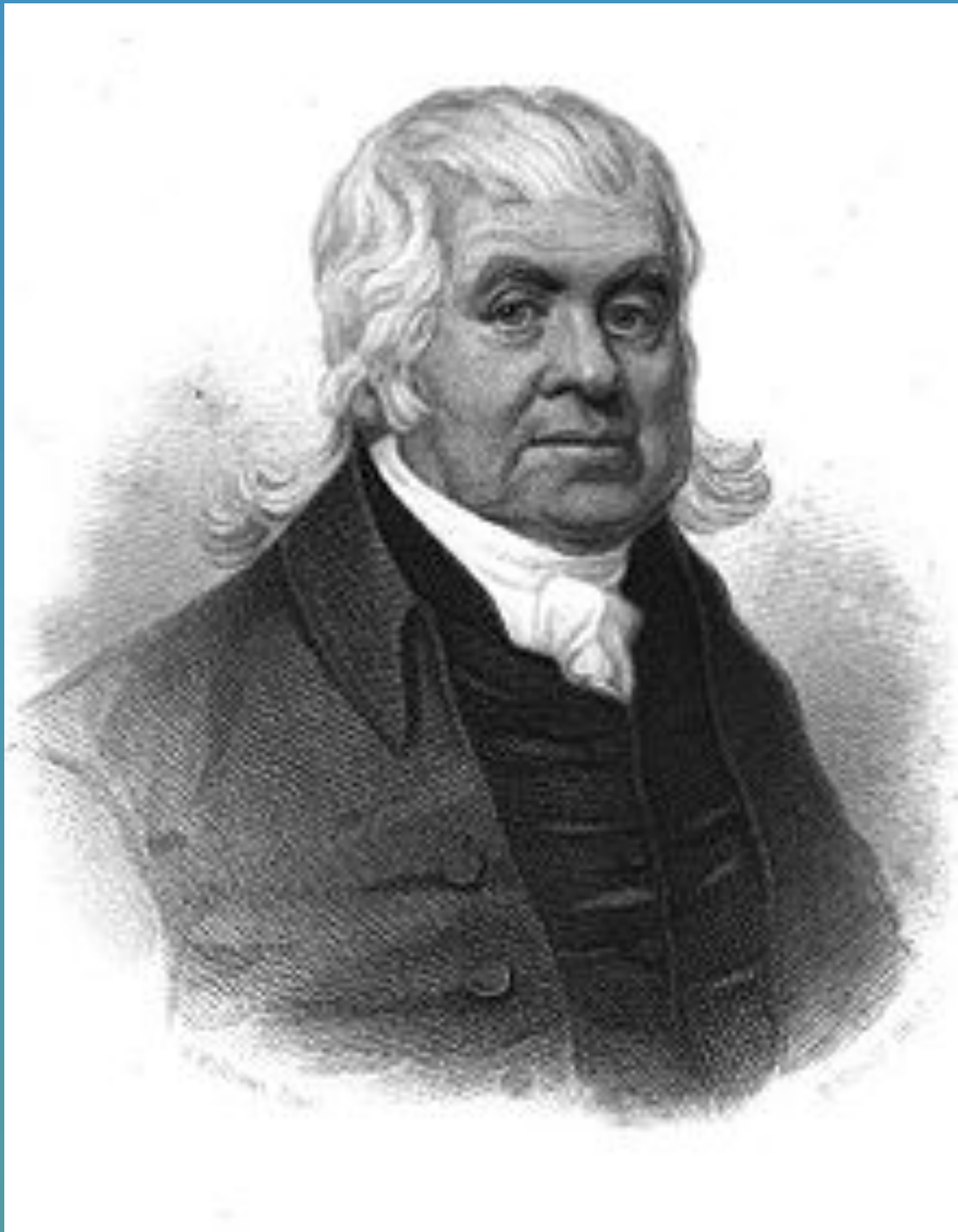
Our story begins with the ocean!
In this part of our history, Universalism comes to
North America. Based on the past weeks' lessons,

which ocean is this?

Yep, it's the Atlantic Ocean between the continents of Europe and North America.

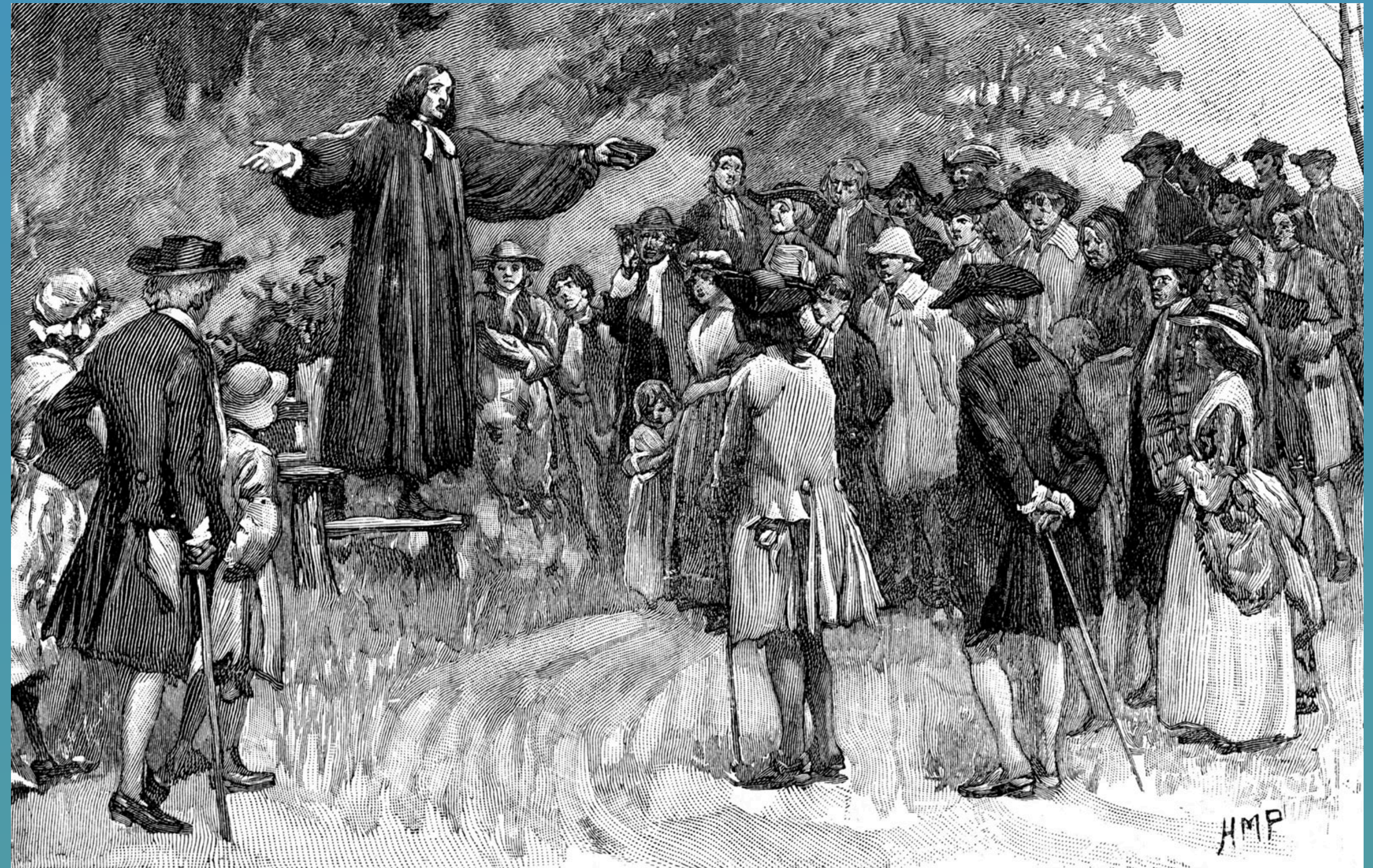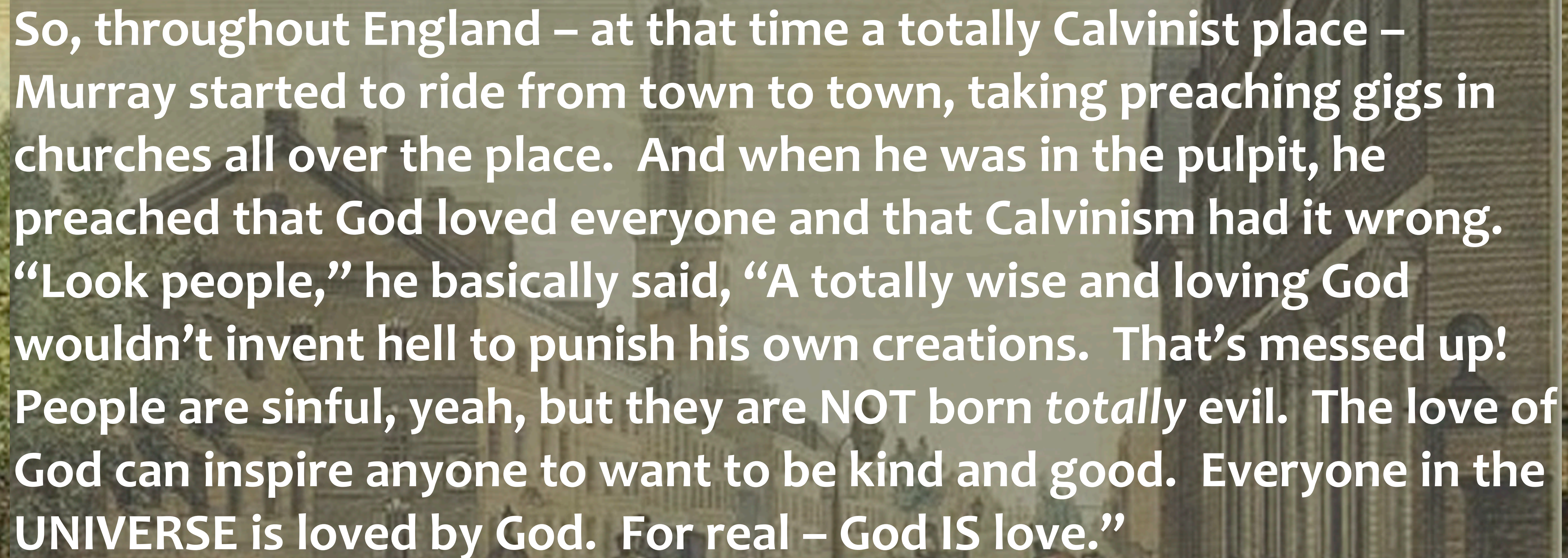Specifically, the coast of England and (what is now) the coast of New Jersey.

This man's name is John Murray. He is the man who will bring Universalism across the Atlantic to North America, where it will grow and thrive.
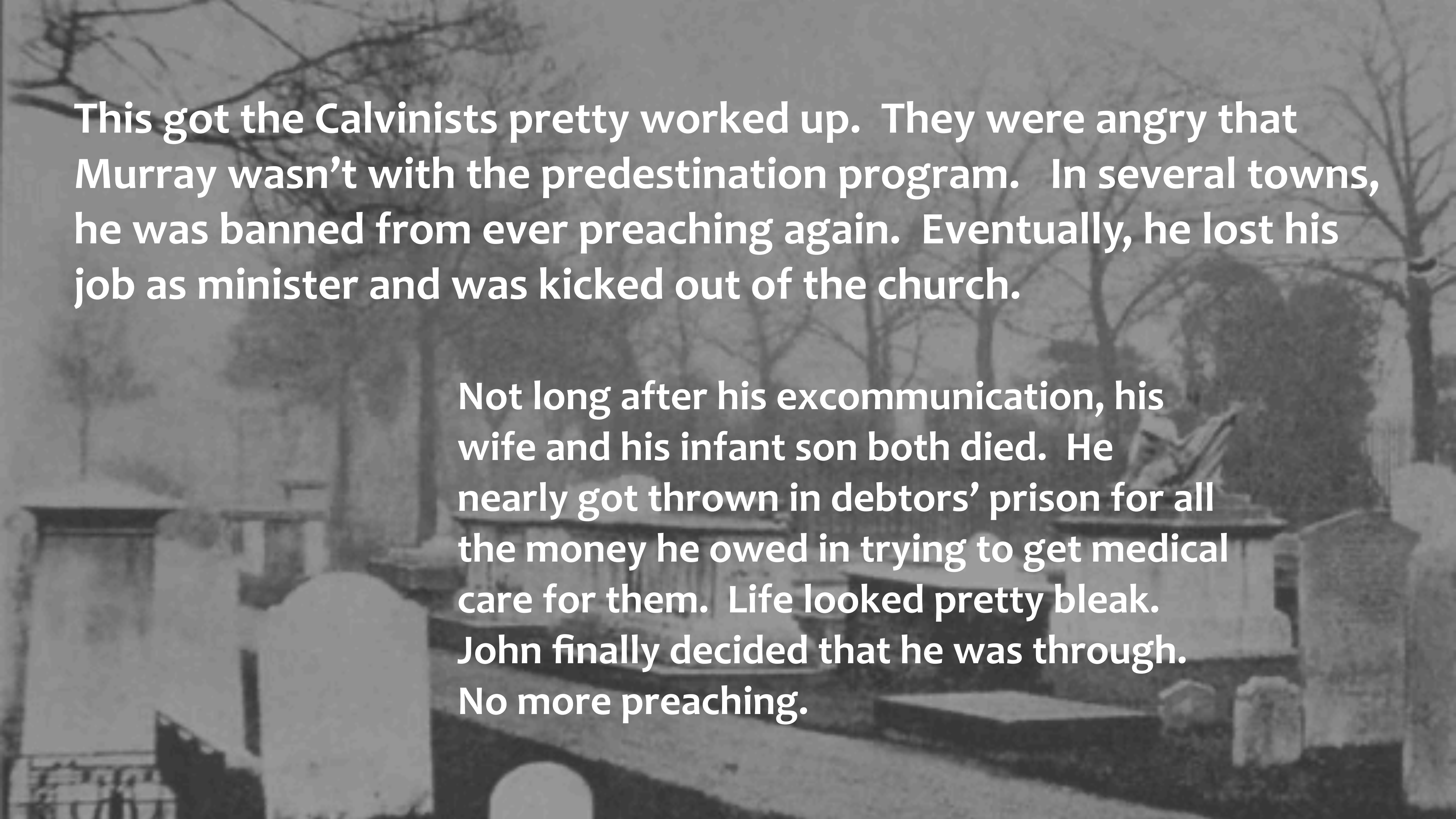
John grew up with strict Calvinist parents.

As a young man, of course,
he rebelled against his parents' beliefs…

At the age of 18, he became a minister and started preaching. The more he read, learned, and reflected, the more he was sure that Calvinism was mistaken. Murray's understanding of God was that God was a source of infinite love for all people.

So, throughout England – at that time a totally Calvinist place – Murray started to ride from town to town, taking preaching gigs in churches all over the place. And when he was in the pulpit, he preached that God loved everyone and that Calvinism had it wrong. "Look people," he basically said, "A totally wise and loving God wouldn't invent hell to punish his own creations. That's messed up! People are sinful, yeah, but they are NOT born *totally* evil. The love of God can inspire anyone to want to be kind and good. Everyone in the UNIVERSE is loved by God. For real – God IS love."

This got the Calvinists pretty worked up. They were angry that Murray wasn't with the predestination program. In several towns, he was banned from ever preaching again. Eventually, he lost his job as minister and was kicked out of the church.

Not long after his excommunication, his wife and his infant son both died. He nearly got thrown in debtors' prison for all the money he owed in trying to get medical care for them. Life looked pretty bleak. John finally decided that he was through. No more preaching.

John knew there was nothing left for him in England – no job, no family – so in 1770, he booked passage on a boat to America, a boat called *The Hand in Hand.*
It was a long trip.

When people on the boat asked why he was going to the New World, John told them,

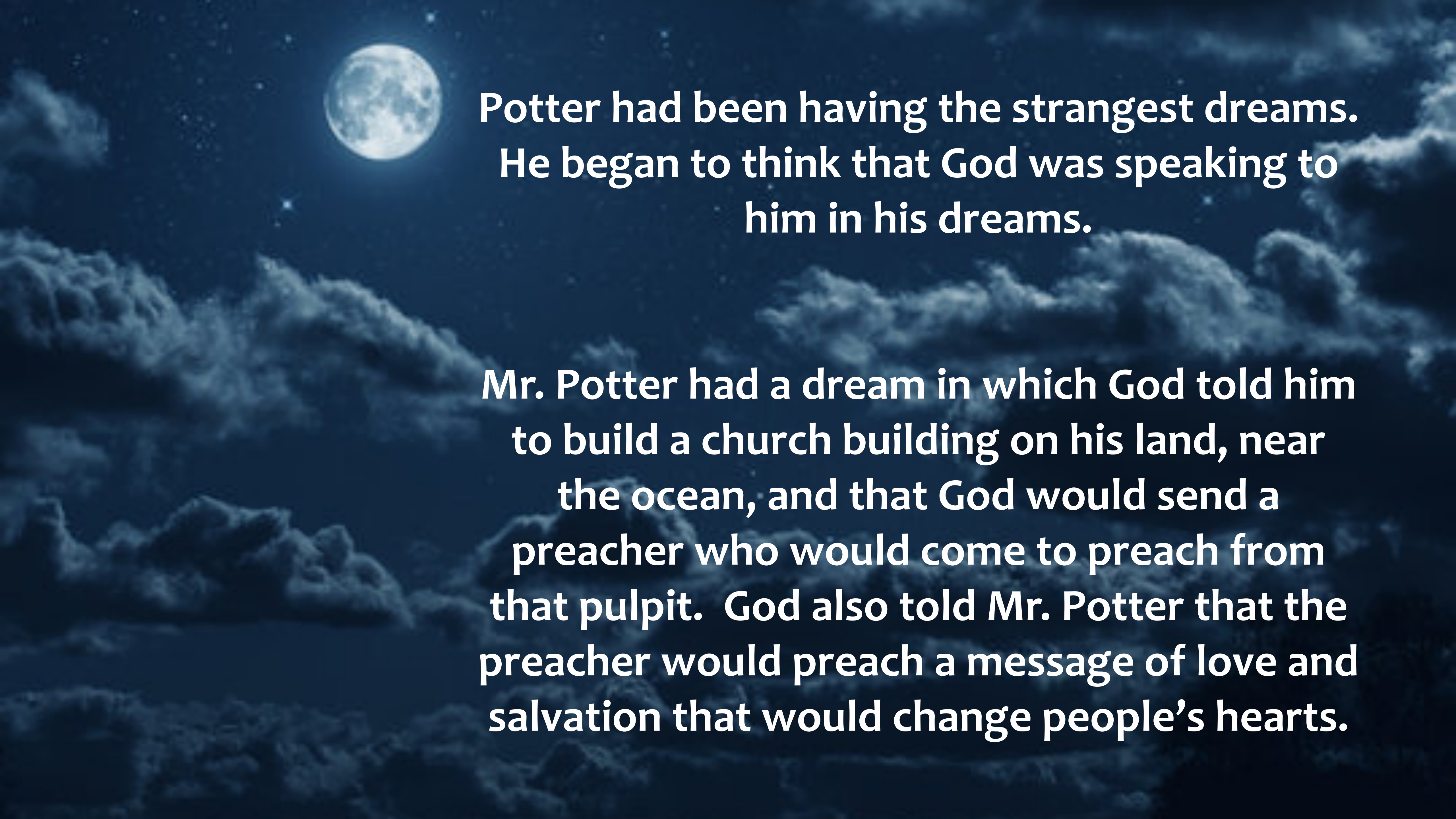"To lose myself."
It was a really long trip.

MEANWHILE… there was a white man in America, named Thomas Potter.

Potter was a farmer who owned a lot of land. He was an illiterate man, but a spiritual man, probably a Quaker, a man who spent hours and days thinking about God and humanity. All his neighbors went to churches that preached "hellfire and brimstone," warning people that they were doomed by God's anger. Church was a terrible downer. Potter had been hearing rumors of Universalism, a new movement in Europe. He heard that Universalism spoke of love rather than hatred. He liked the sound of that a lot more than he liked Calvinism.
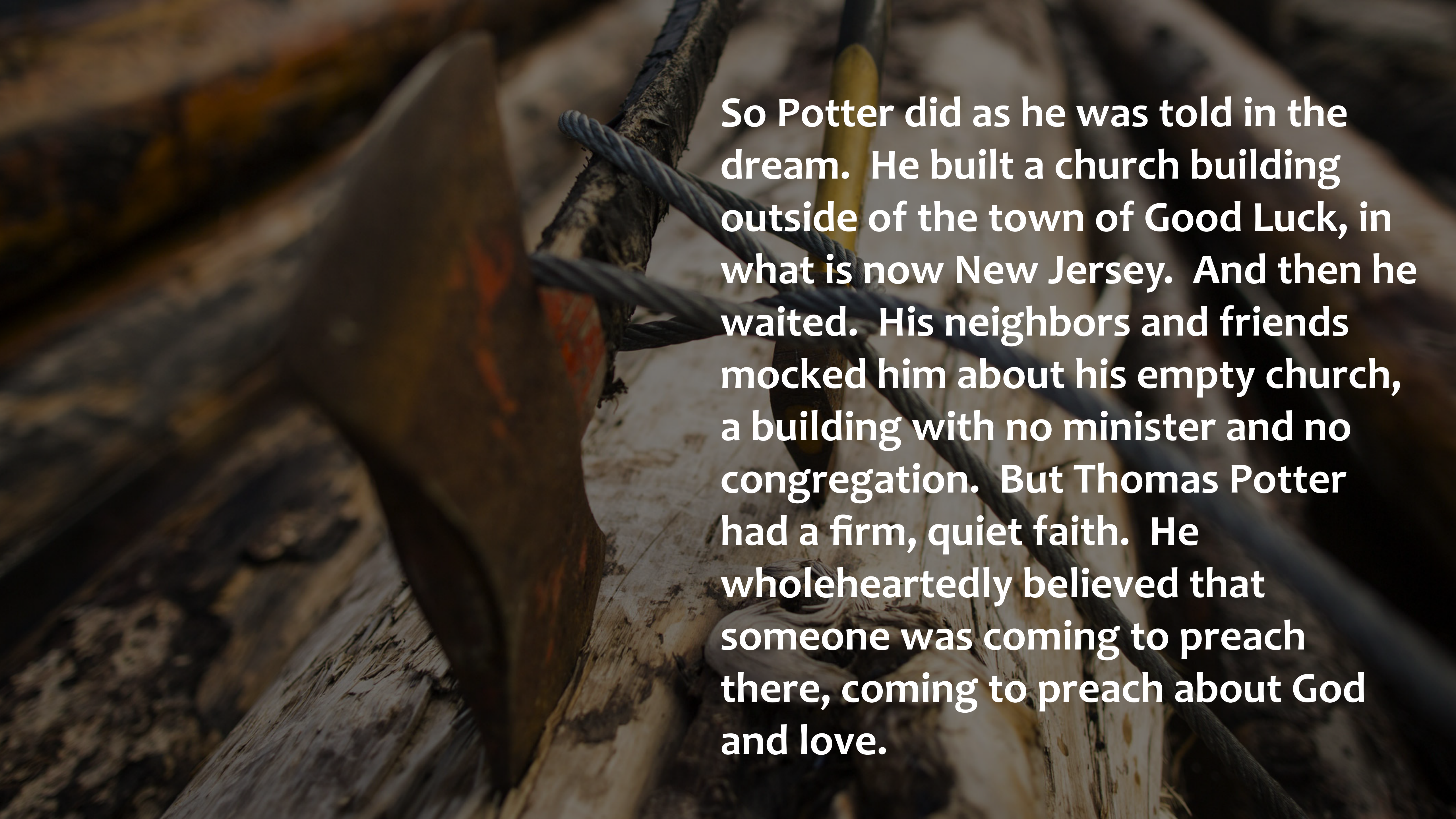

THE POTTER HOMESTEAD

Potter had been having the strangest dreams. He began to think that God was speaking to him in his dreams.

Mr. Potter had a dream in which God told him to build a church building on his land, near the ocean, and that God would send a preacher who would come to preach from that pulpit. God also told Mr. Potter that the preacher would preach a message of love and salvation that would change people's hearts.

So Potter did as he was told in the dream. He built a church building outside of the town of Good Luck, in what is now New Jersey. And then he waited. His neighbors and friends mocked him about his empty church, a building with no minister and no congregation. But Thomas Potter had a firm, quiet faith. He wholeheartedly believed that someone was coming to preach there, coming to preach about God and love.

The Hand in Hand finally made it to America, but just as it neared the coast of New Jersey, it struck a sandbar. The wind continued to blow on shore, keeping the ship pinned in the shallows. So the captain of the ship offloaded some of the heaviest cargo into a smaller boat to lighten the ship. He asked John to go ashore with the cargo, and to buy some food to bring back to the boat while they waited for the wind to turn.

The brig "Hand in Hand aground on a sandbar off Cranberry Inlet

John came to shore. And guess where he set foot on North America?

Yeah – *on Thomas Potter's land.*

Potter met him at the shore and said, "I've been waiting for you." Of course, John didn't know about Mr. Potter or his chapel. They talked for a long time. Potter said he was certain that John Murray had come to preach in his church. John, however, hesitated even to admit that he was actually a minister; he had given that up and didn't want his heart to get broken and beaten again.

Thomas Potter and John Murray meet

Potter said, "Look, I know you have been brought here by a Power greater than yourself. You are *meant* to preach in this church that I was *meant* to build. Your ship is stuck, right? Well, let's just say this: if the wind turns and you get your boat out of here by Sunday, fine. I was wrong and it wasn't meant to be. But if Sunday comes and the wind hasn't shifted and you're still here, you'll take it as a sign. You'll preach in that pulpit. Agreed?"

Murray agreed, thinking for certain that they'd be gone by then. But Friday came and the ship was still stuck. Saturday, the wind hadn't turned. Sunday came, and *The Hand in Hand* was there on the sandbar. John Murray waded ashore and walked to Potter's little waiting chapel.

That Sunday – September 30, 1770 – he climbed into the pulpit and told the gathered people to go out and give people a glimpse of God's love. He said that religion gives us "not hell but hope!" And the people there *wanted* to hear this message. They believed him. They asked him to preach from town to town.

John Murray brought the message of Universalism – of God's love for every human being, without exception – to North America. Our church is his religious descendant. We're not inclined to believe in these kinds of miracles, but it's hard not to be a little amazed by the story of John Murray bringing our faith across the pond.

At Potter's urging, Murray gives the first Universalist sermon in America