

Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It sermon series

“Precursors of Revival”

[Revelation 2:1-5](#)

Today, we are starting a new sermon series called Revival - Faith as Wesley Lived It, which is based on Rev. Adam Hamilton's book of the same title. Several years ago, he and his Bishop, Scott Jones, along with their wives, traveled together to England to retrace the life of John Wesley and the beginning years of the Methodist movement. And, their trip resulted in an ambitious, inspiring book. Throughout this new sermon series, we will reflect on some of the key events in Wesley's life and the most important convictions and practices of the early Methodists. In the process, we will seek to discover lessons for our own spiritual journey.

Revival is not a word that we commonly use nowadays around Methodist churches, but it is very closely associated with our denominational heritage and identity. In fact, the Methodist movement began as a faith revival within the church of England. And it spread rapidly like a wildfire across England and later in America, as well.

The word revival, to revive or to be revived assumes that, in our lives, there are times when we experience dwindled attention and interest, or lack of vigor and vitality in something. We all know this from our own personal experience. We become passionate about something or someone, but our intense feelings fade away as the days and months go by.

When I moved to California last June, I was fascinated with the great weather and the beautiful landscape. There were so many different kinds of flowers and fruit trees. Whenever I was outside I would frequently blurt out the word, “Wow!” It's been just over a year, and I find myself no longer saying the word as often as I did before. Of course, I still love the beautiful weather and scenery, and enjoy them very much. But they no longer make my heart leap with joy when I step outside in the morning because I've gotten used to my new normal.

This same process happens in our spiritual life as well. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, our hearts and lives are filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But, for different reasons, often due to the never-ending busyness of our lives, we stop or reduce the spiritual practices which feed our Spirit, like regularly praying, reading/studying the Bible, worshiping, giving, serving and witnessing. Sooner or later, we lose vitality in our spiritual life and begin to show signs of spiritual emptiness.

In the Book of Revelation, we find 7 churches in such a state. They were all lively churches when they were born. But, as the years went by, their religious zeal began to erode, and by the late 1st century, most of them had lost their spiritual vitality. One of them had become “lukewarm” (Revelation 3:16), another was half dead (Revelation 3:1), and two other churches had even adopted idol worship practices (Revelation 2:14 and 20). And, today's scripture says, the church at Ephesus lost her first love (Revelation 2:4). These were the same members who had been praised for working very hard and enduring many hardships for Christ's

sake. Yet, somehow, most of these church communities had walked away from the love which had awakened their faith.

Flashing forward, many Christians and churches of England in the early 18th century found themselves in a similar spiritual state. For 200 years leading up to the birth of John Wesley, Europe had been involved in religious conflicts. Protestant churches were born through the Reformation movement, but they were met with fierce resistance from the Catholic Church. During this period, many Christians grew weary of religion all together. And then came the Enlightenment, a movement that questioned existing beliefs and traditions, including religious practices. This was the world in which Wesley's church revival movement started in England and spread to America as well.

To understand John Wesley and his church revival movement, we need to examine his family background and upbringing. John Wesley was born in Epworth, England, on June 17th, 1703 to Samuel and Susanna Wesley. John's father was an ordained minister of the Church of England and served St. Andrew's Church in Epworth for nearly 40 years.

John's mother, Susanna, was a well-educated and courageous woman who had both a strong faith and will. She gave birth to 19 children, and 9 of them died as infants. She raised and disciplined her children with strict rules, homeschooling both the boys and girls for 6 hours a day until they were old enough for formal public school education. Susanna was intentional about the faith development of her children, too. Every day, she led her children into prayer before their evening supper. And, she spent an hour a week privately with each child, asking them about their faith. It's quite remarkable that this busy mother of 10 sat down with each child, not just for a few minutes a week, but for an hour, listening to their stories.

As you might imagine, this special experience of meeting with his mother for a weekly conversation about his faith laid the groundwork for John's idea of Methodists' weekly gatherings with other Methodists in small groups in order to ask one another about the state of their souls.

Susanna's influence on the faith of her children continued throughout their lives. She was especially a commanding presence in John's life, as he often consulted her and sought her wisdom for his ministry. For example, initially, John was against the idea of having laity members preach. But, he later changed his view after being challenged on it by his mother. So, from early on, lay preaching was strongly encouraged in Methodist gatherings, and it allowed the Methodist movement to grow rapidly despite the limited number of clergy.

Another example of Susanna's influence on Methodism is the strong presence of women's leadership in the church. First, she believed in women's education. One of the 16 rules she laid down in her home was this: "Require no daughter to work before she can read well." Second, by her own example, she proved that women could teach and preach. In addition to the daily prayer, on Sunday evenings, Susanna held a weekly devotion for her children at home. It attracted other people as the word about her message spread. Her husband received a complaint about the devotions and asked her to stop because it was considered scandalous for her, a woman, to preach. What do you think Susanna did? She wrote to her husband. In her letter, the fearless woman made her case for her weekly meetings and warned him of God's judgment upon them both

for neglecting the opportunity of doing good! Well, her hubby did not say a word again about her weekly services.

While John Wesley learned about faith and spiritual disciplines from his mother, he learned from his father and grandfathers about how to deal with conflicts and disagreements. John's parents were devout Anglicans. But, John's grandfathers, both his mother's and father's were dissenters from the Anglican Church and were strongly influenced by the Puritans. In the midst of this religious conflict in his family, John Wesley had an open mind to different theological views and faith expressions. Between the two church traditions, he sought a middle way, listening to people on both sides and embracing the best each side had to offer.

For example, John Wesley was a clergyperson in the Church of England, yet he embraced Puritan practices of faith. The worship style of his own tradition was highly liturgical, yet he worshiped without much liturgy, too, in his effort to reach out to common people, like farmers and miners in the fields.

In his sermon, "Catholic Spirit," John Wesley said, "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may." (*The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 2, by Albert C. Outler, p. 82)

In many ways, 21st century America is like 18th century England. We are Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, fundamentalists and progressives, liberals and conservatives. The nation is badly polarized, and so are its churches. We, the United Methodists, divided over issues related to human sexuality, are now fearful of a potential denominational split. In such a time as this, in the midst of our divisions and conflicts, we long for Wesley's approach and his catholic, universal spirit.

Having John Wesley's spirit and approach today, seeking a middle way between two sides, means that we assume the best in others, not the worst. It means that we listen more than we talk. It means that we listen to others with love and a genuine desire to understand them. It means that we hold our own views and positions with humility and try to walk in the shoes of others.

There is another lesson Wesley learned from his family: the importance of perseverance. Samuel and Susanna's life was nothing but hardships. It was full of sorrow, adversity, and pain. They lost 9 children. They constantly struggled financially and were often in debt. One time, Samuel was thrown in jail because of his debt, and believe it or not, the creditor was his church member! Other members of his church weren't much friendlier to him and his family, either. Some were so vicious that they set his house, the church parsonage, on fire twice! They almost lost one of their children in the fire. This child was John, who was pulled out of the fire just before the roof collapsed. The rescue made a deep impression on the mind of the 5-year old. Later, John came to believe that God spared his life for a special purpose. He considered himself as a "brand plucked from the burning," quoting a scripture from Zechariah (Zechariah 3:2).

However, despite all these hardships and sufferings, Samuel and Susanna never gave up on their faith and ministry. After each of these horrible incidents, Samuel returned to his church and continued to preach and visit until his death, while still facing opposition from his parishioners. Susanna also continued her work as

mother and minister's wife without any complaint. In the face of hardship, they didn't give up, but instead persevered.

John Wesley also faced hardships in his life and ministry. He faced opposition. He faced failures and disappointments. But, whenever trouble came his way, having learned the importance of perseverance from watching his parents, John Wesley did not give up. Instead, he turned to God for help. And it was in leaning on the everlasting arms of God that he was able to successfully lead a church revival movement for 40 years, traveling 8,000 miles per year on horseback and preaching 1,000 sermons per year.

So far, we have noted 3 precursors to the Methodist movement, which was a church revival movement in the 18th century: Wesley had parents who raised and mentored him spiritually; In a world of polarization and conflict, he had a spirit and approach to bring both sides together and find a middle way; and he learned to persevere and never give up in the face of hardship and opposition.

Revival happens through people who are willing to come together despite their differences and work together to find a middle way, a common ground. Revival happens through people who are willing to mentor others and help them grow. Revival happens through people who never give up on their faith and turn to God for help.

As we meditate on the experience of revival in our Methodist tradition and how we might prepare our hearts for a spirit of revival, I would like to encourage you to pray with me throughout this sermon series for God to spark a revival in our congregation. May our hearts be filled with the love that first awakened our faith. Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to renew our dimmed vision, so that we may once again behold the majesty of the living God at work in our midst and proclaim in awesome wonder, How Great Thou Art!