

BGO Sermon for 10-23-16 – Revival: It’s Built On Faith
Romans 5:1-11, 18-21 (Message), Philippians 3:5-14 (NLT), Mark 12:28-34 (Message)

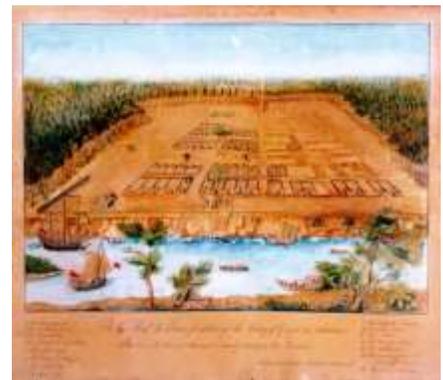
Have you ever been in the place where you’re studying your Bible, praying, serving in the church, yet instead of feeling closer to God, you feel farther away? I’ve heard people in other churches describe it as feeling dry, lost in a wilderness. You wonder what you’re doing wrong, maybe even if God has abandoned you. Ever felt that way? Believe it or not, you’re in good company.

We’re continuing our “*Revival*” sermon series, sharing some of the insights that Amy and I got this summer from our Wesley pilgrimage in England. Many of those insights came from hearing about the life of John Wesley, and about the revival he helped bring about in his native homeland. But we also gained insights into the practices that he developed in his lifetime - those spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship and service, the practices Wesley insisted those of his movement employ. The goal for us is revival - in ourselves and in our churches. We’re picking up Wesley’s story with his time in Oxford, but we’ll take a little side trip from England - all the way to the American Colonies, and back.

John’s father Samuel passed away while John was a faculty member at Oxford,



leaving his home church of St. Andrew’s in Epworth without a pastor: John’s position if he wanted it, having already proven himself as associate pastor. At the same time, the governor of America’s Georgia colony was looking for volunteers to come to the New World to be a spiritual guide for the colonists, and bring “the savages” the Gospel. John, being in his



30’s, single, experienced and capable seemed a perfect fit.



John sought guidance from friends and family, and spent a lot of time in prayer. He would meditate in the chapel there in Oxford, in front of a stained glass window of Jonah, and wonder whether the opportunity in the New World was his own call to Ninevah, or a boat leading in the opposite direction of God’s will for him. It was finally the influence of his mother Susanna that made the difference; her words to John convincing him on going to Georgia: “*had I twenty sons, I should rejoice that they were all so employed, though I should never see them more.*”

So 281 years ago this month, John and his brother Charles headed to America.



In my mind, the mission was a bust from day one. Terribly afraid of sailing, John suffered through three storms in the voyage. What made it worse for him, while he was quaking in his boots, another group of Christians from Moravia on the boat with him were calmly singing hymns and psalms, causing John to question if HE was an “altogether Christian”.

Things went no better once he arrived. Though Wesley had some initial success with the colonists, his strict demands for spiritual discipline soon turned them against him. He had even less success with the Native American tribes, who had already been alienated by the Spanish explorers’ salvation plan: “convert... or die.” The small groups Wesley started for the colonists, like the one he led at Oxford, slowly dwindled in members.

Then there was the girl. Her name was Sophie Hopkey. Though half his age, there was a mutual attraction. Wesley might have considered himself a suitor, but for several reasons John wouldn’t commit. Sophie wouldn’t wait; she married another man, without advanced warning to John either as suitor or pastor. Somehow feeling betrayed, he refused her communion. Her new husband brought him up on charges, with Sophie’s legal guardian being the colony’s presiding judge. Before coming to trial, Wesley jumped bail and hopped the 1st ship back to England.

Some scholars say Wesley made great strides in his Christian life in Georgia; Wesley himself would not be so generous. His quote about the years there: *I went to America to convert the Indians; but oh, who shall convert me? I can talk well; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled.*

Wesley went to the New World with Capability, Commitment and a sense of Calling. So what was missing? Turns out it was assurance: it was a sure faith.



JOHN WESLEY PREACHING TO THE INDIANS

Once back in England, Wesley sought out some of those Moravian Christians who had faced death so calmly, joining them in their studies. And it was on Aldersgate Street in London, at one of those studies, as one of them was reading from Martin Luther’s Preface to the Book of Romans when John Wesley found his heart “strangely warmed.” Wesley would later write about that night:



I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

I keep seeing parallels between the life of Wesley and the writer of that letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul describes his life before his encounter with Christ: ***I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.*** Yes, a real Hebrew if there ever was one!

But after recognizing the love of God in the depth of Christ's sacrifice, Paul realized that he could no longer count on his own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, we become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith.

So when Paul wrote to the Romans, he could write: ***By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way.***

Back to Wesley: you know, I've heard that story over and over, about Aldersgate and Wesley hearing Luther's Preface to Romans - heard it for at least 30 years, Yet it took to this year for me to think, "You know, I ought to read that thing."

This is some of what Luther wrote:

Faith is a work of God in us, which changes us and brings us to birth anew from God (cf. John 1). It kills the old Adam, makes us completely different people in heart, mind, senses, and all our powers, and brings the Holy Spirit with it. What a living, creative, active powerful thing is faith!

Faith is a living, unshakeable confidence in God's grace; it is so certain, that someone would die a thousand times for it. This kind of trust in and knowledge of God's grace makes a person joyful, confident, and happy with regard to God and all creatures. This is what the Holy Spirit does by faith. Through faith, a person will do good to everyone without coercion, willingly and happily; he will serve everyone, suffer everything for the love and praise of God, who has shown him such grace. It is as impossible to separate works from faith as burning and shining from fire.



That living, unshakable confidence in God's grace helped Wesley recognize the truth of Paul's words from Romans Chapter 8: *God's Spirit touches our spirits and confirms who we really are. We know who he is, and we know who we are: Father and children. And we know we are going to get what's coming to us—an unbelievable inheritance!*

It also helped Wesley take the spiritual disciplines he practiced - prayer, study, Christian fellowship, acts of service and mercy - and put them in their place. Instead of being means of earning salvation, he recognized them as means of Grace, channels for God's undeserved love to flow into our lives, bringing remembrance of God's work in the past, reliance in God's work in our lives here and now, and re-creation as God works to make us more like Christ in the future.

With a sermon like the one today, I feel like I spend too much time on Christians like Wesley and not enough time talking about Christ. Then again, that's part of the problem with our faith life: we spend too much time focused on us, what we do and how we feel, taking our focus off of what God does and what God's will is for us. But just as it did for Wesley, recognizing God's work for us in Christ helps us get our lives into perspective. In those times when we don't feel close to God, we can rely in our faith in God's continuing presence. When we share our faith with others and wonder if it makes a difference, we can rely in our faith in the Holy Spirit to grow the seeds we plant. And when it seems like the things we do aren't working, we can rely in our faith that God works all things to the good for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And those works that we do? Well, they help us press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed us, helping us press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

Folks, we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit! Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn't, and doesn't, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we're at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life!

ROMANS 5:1-11, 18-21 (Message)

¹⁻² By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

³⁻⁵ There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

⁶⁻⁸ Christ arrives right on time to make this happen. He didn’t, and doesn’t, wait for us to get ready. He presented himself for this sacrificial death when we were far too weak and rebellious to do anything to get ourselves ready. And even if we hadn’t been so weak, we wouldn’t have known what to do anyway. We can understand someone dying for a person worth dying for, and we can understand how someone good and noble could inspire us to selfless sacrifice. But God put his love on the line for us by offering his Son in sacrificial death while we were of no use whatever to him.

⁹⁻¹¹ Now that we are set right with God by means of this sacrificial death, the consummate blood sacrifice, there is no longer a question of being at odds with God in any way. If, when we were at our worst, we were put on friendly terms with God by the sacrificial death of his Son, now that we’re at our best, just think of how our lives will expand and deepen by means of his resurrection life! Now that we have actually received this amazing friendship with God, we are no longer content to simply say it in plodding prose. We sing and shout our praises to God through Jesus, the Messiah!

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ Here it is in a nutshell: Just as one person did it wrong and got us in all this trouble with sin and death, another person did it right and got us out of it. But more than just getting us out of trouble, he got us into life! One man said no to God and put many people in the wrong; one man said yes to God and put many in the right.

²⁰⁻²¹ All that passing laws against sin did was produce more lawbreakers. But sin didn’t, and doesn’t, have a chance in competition with the aggressive forgiveness we call *grace*. When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that’s the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life—a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.

PHILIPPIANS 3:5-14 (NLT)

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done.

⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

MARK 12:28-34 (Message)

²⁸ One of the religion scholars came up. Hearing the lively exchanges of question and answer and seeing how sharp Jesus was in his answers, he put in his question: “Which is most important of all the commandments?”

²⁹⁻³¹ Jesus said, “The first in importance is, ‘Listen, Israel: The Lord your God is one; so love the Lord God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence and energy.’ And here is the second: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ There is no other commandment that ranks with these.”

³²⁻³³ The religion scholar said, “A wonderful answer, Teacher! So lucid and accurate—that God is one and there is no other. And loving him with all passion and intelligence and energy, and loving others as well as you love yourself. Why, that’s better than all offerings and sacrifices put together!”

³⁴ When Jesus realized how insightful he was, he said, “You’re almost there, right on the border of God’s kingdom.” After that, no one else dared ask a question.