

This past week I had the opportunity to talk and email with so many of our members on the Rappahannock Charge. It was great to hear how everyone was doing and to listen to their experience of Easter this year. Although it was certainly a different Easter for all of us, what I kept hearing from each person is that they are growing in their faith in new ways because they have had time to slow down. I was very encouraged by this because even during this pandemic and isolation, we have the opportunity to grow in our faith.

If you look back throughout history, it is amazing to see that the difficult experiences in our lives have led to a revival in our faith. Our roots in United Methodism are no different. For the next six weeks we will prepare ourselves to once again receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and experience revival.

We will be using Adam Hamilton’s book: “Revival” to guide this time of study. In his book, Hamilton writes: “I believe the seeds of our revival, and the revival of Christianity today, are to be found in the story of our beginning.”¹ I agree with Adam.

For the next couple of weeks, we will look back to see how Methodism started and how God is still calling all of us to have a revival of our faith.

To start at the very beginning of Methodism, we have to start with our founder, John Wesley. To his mother, Susanna, John was a “brand plucked from the fire” just as we read in the book of Zechariah today. To understand John’s heart for revival we have to look back at an experience he had when he was five years old.

Something interesting that I did not know about John’s family growing up is that his dad, Samuel, was a pastor, but the congregation did not respond positively to his leadership. You see, his dad was loyal to the king, in a time that many people in his congregation did not agree with the king’s leadership.

There was so much conflict within his congregation that one evening it is thought that one of his congregation members set fire to the parsonage that had a thatched roof. Well the house immediately went up in flames.

The family stood outside the house, but suddenly realized that John was missing. His father tried to go in and get him, but the flames were too high. So, Samuel came back outside and started to commend his son’s spirit into the arms of God thinking that certainly he would die.

Then some neighbors saw him in the window and stood on each other’s shoulders to get him. That day Hamilton describes that “John understood that his life [was] spared by God for some great purpose, and this sense of destiny was what he believed he had found in leading the people called Methodist.”ⁱⁱ

For every great faith revival there is something called “precursors to revival” these are the situations in our lives that make revival possible.ⁱⁱⁱ If we look back to the people called Methodists and Christians throughout the Bible we can see that we have a lot in common with those in need of a revival.

First, we have to acknowledge that we are in need of revival. Revival is not something that we are doing. It is something that God is doing through our faith in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is how God continues to help us live into the new life that is available to us in Jesus Christ.

We now find ourselves in the season of Easter, the time we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But what we find is that those in the New Testament also knew this truth and still had a hard time moving forward into this new life.

For instance, today in the lectionary Scripture from John 20 we find that the disciples were locked in a room and deep in fear. Then Jesus appeared to them and offered them peace. Thomas missed Jesus’ visit and even though the other disciples told him that they had “seen the Lord” Thomas would not believe them until he saw Jesus with his own eyes (John 20:26-29). Then he believed. Jesus said to him: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”^{iv}

We are like Thomas in the way that we want assurance so that we can continue to believe in Jesus Christ. For Thomas this was probably his moment of revival, the moment where his life made sense and he would keep moving forward for God’s purpose.

In that moment, the disciples and Thomas needed revival. Jesus was dead and they didn’t know what to do, so the resurrected Christ came to them and led them forward.

Last Sunday, we heard once again the resurrection story of Jesus Christ and that we too are charged to go forward to share that we also have “seen the Lord.” We can do that when we make room in our hearts for a revival.

We need revival, especially during this uncertain season of our lives. So, we also acknowledge along with Christians who came many years before us that our faith may not be where we would like it to be and we need God’s to help us get there.

We find comfort that there are so many others before us who have been in our shoes in need of revival. In his book Hamilton shares: “By the time Revelation was written, Ephesus, along with some of the other churches of Revelation, had lost its vitality. Christ, speaking to the author of Revelation, noted that the believers in Laodicea had become ‘lukewarm’ and that the Christians at Ephesus had lost their first love. These Christians were busy, but their activities had not produced spiritual vitality. In Revelation, the Lord told them the key to their spiritual revival was do ‘do the works you did at first.’”^v

In this message from Revelation 2 Christ, through John, reminds us to keep it simple. That revival will not come from doing 10,000 activities, that it comes from a deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.

I wonder where you find yourselves today: do you feel lukewarm in your faith or maybe burnt out from the busyness of life? Perhaps you are feeling exhausted or disenfranchised. Wherever you are, we are in this together and it is together that we can find revival, because revival happens in the context of community.

2) **The second precursor to revival is that we have what Adam Hamilton would call a “teachable spirit.”**^{vi} This means that we recognize we don’t know everything and there is always more to learn about God. Throughout his ministry, Wesley kept learning new ideas and ways to express his faith and help others grow in their discipleship.

We too are called to approach this time of revival with humility and openness. You see John Wesley had been brought up in the Church of England under the tutelage of his father who was a pastor at Epworth. This was all that he knew, yet when he went to Oxford University, he met some new friends who showed him that sometimes you have to go beyond the walls of the church to help others experience revival.

One of these moments in John Wesley’s life happened after his father had passed away. The new pastor of his home church would no longer allow him to preach there because he did not agree with his newfound ideology. So, that day John Wesley preached outside standing on the grave of his father to a much larger crowd than had attended the earlier church service that day.^{vii}

John Wesley was blessed from a very strong foundation of faith from both of his parents, yet over the years he made his faith his own and helped others to find ways to embody theirs.

In his sermon on “Catholic Spirit,” Wesley wrote: “Though we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?”^{viii} John Wesley brought many different kinds of people together through the movement of Methodism because he showed people that although we may express our faith differently, we have one common goal to love others for the glory of God.

So, during this season, may we also have a teachable spirit and be open to learning new things about ourselves and the way God is calling us to grow in our faith.

The last precursor for revival is 3) Learned perseverance in the face of opposition.^{ix} Hamilton shares that life is hard for all of us. Especially during this season, but one of the characteristics of our faith is that we are called to persevere through difficult times.

Hamilton shares that Wesley teaches us: “When suffering, tragedy, and opposition come, don’t turn away, turn to God. And don’t give up.”^x John Wesley’s family experienced a lot of suffering. For instance, his parents lost nine of their children at birth or in early childhood, their house was burned down, and Samuel experienced much conflict during his many years of ministry.^{xi}

But out of that time of suffering and opposition John Wesley was shaped to lead a movement of faith that is still going on in the world today.

In the Bible we know that the Apostle Paul suffered more than we could imagine. He was “imprisoned...beaten with rods...left for dead...shipwrecked...yet he refused to give up.”^{xii}

So, during this time we are called not to give up on our faith. We are called to be creative and look forward to a time of revival, but there is work to be done on our part.

First, we must acknowledge, we are in need of revival.

We may not have the moment like Thomas where we see Christ with holes in his hands proving to us his resurrection. I think many of us may wait for a moment like this, but Christ’s assurance in our lives may take on many different forms.

We need to be open and have a “teachable spirit” recognizing that God may be teaching us a new way, a different way to be the church to live into God’s calling on our lives. This is the time for innovation. This is the time to try new spiritual practices, which we will talk more about next week.

This is the time to read the Bible and other books that build up our faith.

Finally, we have to acknowledge that this time is hard. We miss being part of our community, we miss worshipping God together as one.

But just like Christians so many years ago, although we cannot be together in body, we remain strong in spirit. May we be comforted today that we like so many Christians before us and John Wesley himself, are all trying to figure out this faith thing together and God will lead the way.

Today I leave you with this question: In what ways is your faith in Jesus Christ in need of revival?

May we all be open to the ways that God is moving in our lives during this time for God’s glory.

The good news for our lives today is that God will continue to bring revival to our faith, just as this happened in the early church.

All we have to do is to seek God and be open to the Holy Spirit to change our lives for God’s glory and God will do the rest. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. “Revival: Faith As Wesley Lived It.” Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 12.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 32.

^{iv} NRSV Wesley Bible. John 20:29b.

^v Adam Hamilton. P. 17.

^{vi} Adam Hamilton. P. 32.

^{vii} Adam Hamilton. P. 35.

^{viii} Adam Hamilton. P. 27.

^{ix} Adam Hamilton. P. 32.

^x Adam Hamilton. P. 29.

^{xi} Adam Hamilton. P. 31.

^{xii} Ibid.

Additional Resource

Bruce M. Metzger. “Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation.” Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 2019.