

There he sat at a meeting at Aldersgate in London, feeling like a fraud. The founder of our denomination. This wasn't the first time he had this feeling. The last time he felt like this he was on a boat with a bunch of Moravians. When a bad storm came up, he feared for his life, while they were without fear and continued to worship God.

One if someone found out he was a fraud? Would they lose their faith in Christ? He couldn't understand how he got to this point. Surely, he had put the time in, he was faithful.

He practiced personal holiness. He journaled every one of his sins and asked for God's forgiveness. He confessed these sins to his friends and was prayed over. He prayed for others. He loved the Bible and studied every word of it. He read other books about holiness so that he could embody even more practices to become more holy. He fasted twice a week and arose early to worship.

He practiced holiness of life. With his friends in college he visited prisons, received communion, and made connections with people in the community. Every moment of his day was devoted to serving God.

So why did he have this feeling of impending doom? Even his little brother Charles had come to feel faith in his heart. But he had not. What was wrong with him?

So, he sat there defeated, yet still hoping for God to work in him. He was searching and that is why he showed up at Aldersgate that night.

It wasn't that John Wesley didn't believe in God; in fact, the opposite was true. He dedicated his entire life to God and served in every way humanly possible. The problem for him is that he did not feel that God had saved him in his heart.

He understood in his mind how this occurred. He could explain this concept theologically and preach it to others. He could cite countless Scriptures proving that God loved him and that through his faith in Christ he was saved...but he wasn't feeling it.

For me hearing about this experience John Wesley had, this crisis of faith, gives me solace, it shows that even the best leaders have moments when they cannot rely on themselves and must put their trust in God.

Then something happened...as Wesley listened to someone read “Luther's Preface on the Epistle to the Romans...[he] felt his heart stragely warmed.”ⁱ

This was the most important moment in John Wesley’s life, and it led to a revival of his faith and it led him to continue to form the people called Methodists.

I often wonder what would have happened if John Wesley just gave up. One if he became so disillusioned and so burned out that he left the ministry and simply did something else as a profession? So many people would have missed out on hearing about God’s grace from him.

I too have experienced a moment of crisis in my faith and maybe you have too.

When I was sixteen years old, I questioned everything. I had been very involved in my church, serving in many leadership capacities. I was a leader at my high school and was a captain on both the field hockey and soccer team. I was a leader my choir and even got accepted to All-State choir. And yet, none of these accomplishments seemed to matter, I still did not feel good enough and this feeling pervaded my relationship with God.

One evening I was serving as a team member on a Chrysalis Retreat, a retreat for teenage girls. There I was the music director and I was supposed to make myself available to those on the retreat in whatever way they needed especially as they needed support and prayer.

One evening we went to the sanctuary in the beautiful monastery in Richmond in which we were staying. There was a huge wooden cross in the middle of the room and the participants were invited to nail their sins to the cross or anything else that was weighing them down. Keep in mind this was an activity for the participants.

For some reason I felt compelled to go forward and do this activity. And as I nailed my sins to the cross, I felt a moment of release, of letting go my perfectionism. I started sobbing, which is very unlike me, and it was the participants who comforted me.

This was an important moment in my life, I knew what it meant to be a Christian and have faith, but in this moment, I knew what it felt like to receive the love and grace of God.

This is what happened to Wesley at Aldersgate. As Adam Hamilton describes, “[Wesley’s] faith moved from his head to his heart.”ⁱⁱ

In Wesley’s own words he said: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my 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.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As we continue on today in our third week of our “Revival” sermon series, we continue to follow the life of John Wesley as outlined by Adam Hamilton’s book revival.

This book reminds us that John Wesley was just like you and me. He experienced profound failure and heartbreak, yet he continued to do the work of God. Perhaps this pandemic has led you to have a crisis of faith, but today God comforts us that even when we doubt and question God, God loves us anyway.

Today in our Gospel lesson from John, we experience the resurrected Christ spending time with the disciples for the second time. Here in this passage we see Christ talking to Peter.

Can you imagine how Peter must of felt? Can you imagine the guilt he carried with him to this point? That he, a disciple of Christ, had rejected Christ not once but three times. That he had abandoned Christ on the cross.

In this passage we see Christ extend grace to Peter and even redemption.

Peter, originally named Simon, was a fisherman along with his brother Andrew. They were the first two people that Jesus called to follow him and amazingly enough they did. They were with Jesus through it all.

Simon proved himself to be a strong leader so Jesus named him Peter which means “the rock” and said, he would “build his church” upon this rock (Matthew 16:18). You see Peter was not just a disciple. He sat on the inner circle with two others with Jesus because Jesus invited him amazing situation that others were not a part of including various healings and when Jesus was transfigured on the mountaintop and Elijah and Moses showed up.^{iv} Peter really knew who Jesus was and he was the first disciple to preach the good news on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

But Peter wasn’t always so perfect. In fact, scripture shows us that he is quite impulsive. Also, and most notably when asked if he was associate with Jesus, he denied Christ three times in his greatest time of need.

Due to this moment, Peter probably experienced a crisis of faith.

After his denial of Christ, he probably wondered who he was and who God continued to call him to be. He probably wondered how he could even call himself a disciple of Christ, but here we find him with the disciples. I am sure he was ashamed to make his way back to this inner circle. Even if they did not know what happened he knew. He certainly did not feel like “the rock” the name Jesus had given him, now.

Here in this exchange with Jesus Christ, we see that Peter is given a second chance. In this moment, he remembers who he is, what Christ has called him to do, and he decides to continue to follow Christ.

This moment prepares him for the powerful sermon he will preach on Pentecost to all those who experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Here we see Peter’s life take on a new direction. Instead of drowning in the guilt and shame of failure, Christ offers him a way forward. “The Wesley Bible” shares that “Jesus three questions and Peter’s three responses correspond to Peter’s triple denial.”^v In this moment, Christ gives him the chance to right his wrong, and be commissioned to go forward to serve.

We all have these moments in our lives in which we have a crisis of faith. Maybe it is due to this pandemic, or the death of someone you love, maybe it is due to something that happened to you at the hands of another. A lot of different circumstances bring us to this moment of crisis. But in these moments God is with us.

Psalm 31 reminds us that God is our “rock and refuge.” God is the one who remains our constant, even when we are unable to feel that God is with us.

Maybe like Peter and John Wesley, you have experienced the moment of connection. The moment you feel the connection of mind and heart and believe that Christ has saved even you. Maybe you are still searching and look forward to having this moment.

One thing John Wesley reminds us is never give up. God will continue to work in us in spite of us.

Especially the times we feel that God is far away, that is when we should seek God. Eventually, we will find that God has been there all along.

One of John Wesley’s friends, Peter Boehler, gave him some great advice. When Wesley confessed to his friend that he was having a hard time moving forward in his faith and life, and was even having a hard time thinking about preaching, Boehler told him: “Preach faith until you have it, and then, because you have it, you will preach faith.”^{vi}

In other words, this is why our spiritual practices are important, they keep us oriented to God. God continues to move in our lives even when we are unaware of it.

The last important thing I want to leave you with today is a lesson that John Wesley teaches us through this tumultuous time in his life. That the storms of our faith “often play a part in great revivals of faith.”^{vii}

As we continue to weather this storm, this pandemic together, may our hearts remain fertile so that on Pentecost Sunday, we too can experience revival and feel that our hearts are also strangely warmed. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ Adam Hamilton. “Revival.” Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 2014. P. 70

ⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 73.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. P. 70.

^{iv} Katharine Sakenfeld et al. The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Vol. 4. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 2009. P. 475.

^v Wesley Study Bible. P. 1320.

^{vi} Hamilton. P. 69.

^{vii} Ibid. P. 63.