John Wesley Memory Verse: Romans 5:1

July 30th, 2023 Scripture Reading: Romans 10: 5-10

**SLIDE 1 - TITLE**

Throughout this series, we have been delving into the stories of famous men and women of God. We have been particularly looking at their conversions…those times when God met with them, times when God broke into their lives and enacted a change, a transformation. When we meet with Jesus, our lives will never be the same.

We looked at the story of the apostle Paul, we looked at Augustine and last week we looked at a nun known as St. Teresa of Avila. This morning we consider someone who has a story of which you and I are actually a part. We are now sitting in a church that belongs to the Methodist denomination, a movement that was started by John Wesley.

**SLIDE 2: Wesley**

But much like St. Teresa, we are talking about a conversion story that happened to someone who was already living their life in service to God. But as we get into it, you will see how Wesley was changed by his conversion experience.

Remember, we have been saying that conversion begins with the truth; a new understanding comes to us. And that truth then shows us the ugliness of our sin, we become aware that something is not right in our lives. And knowing about this sin is a great opportunity because now, through Jesus, we are able to enter into forgiveness, we get to know what grace is. And this then spurs us onward with a new mission for life.

Now John Wesley grew up in the faith. His father was a pastor and his mother was devoted to bringing her children up in the Lord. By today’s standards, we might refer to her as downright militant. In Wesley’s personal journals there are included a few letter written by his mother that outline her thought process and practice when it comes to raising children. John’s mother, Susanna, writes, “In order to form the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an observant temper…when the will of a child is totally subdued and it is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents, then a great many childish follies and inadvertences will be passed by.” She says, “Self-will is the root of all sin and misery.” She taught her children the Lord’s prayer as soon as they could talk, she taught them to read from the book of Genesis, and she spent time with each child individually each evening. How could one raised under the tutelage of such a mother not be converted?

Well, by all accounts, John was a Christian and a powerful one at that. He followed in his father’s footsteps and pursued a life in ministry. While attending Oxford, John, along with his brother Charles and a few other friends established what they called a “Holy Club”.

**SLIDE 3: Holy Club & Methodists**

They would gather a few evenings a week to discuss scripture or classic works written by spiritual leaders. They resolved to help and support those who were in need and in everyway to give their lives to God. In fact, their lives became so peculiar, that other students came to make fun of them by calling them “Methodists” as they lived out their faith with such purpose. This purposefulness eventually led John to sail for America in order that he might bring the good news of the gospel to native Americans. And in 1735 he set out for Georgia to “live wholly to the glory of God.” It was not an easy trip as their ship was struck by many storms along the way. This experience made John realize that he was actually quite afraid to die. He admits that he actually became ashamed of his unwillingness to die. So here was a man risking his life to preach the word of God in a foreign country to a people that Wesley believed needed to hear the gospel, and yet he is ashamed of himself. The truth had caught up with him…Wesley feared death.

Now, I would assume for most of us that were we to be caught in a terrible storm at sea, we might fear for our lives as well. And if someone like Wesley came to us after the fact and told us of their fear, I assume we would tend to offer and understanding reply such as, “I can’t even imagine what you were going through”, or, “I would have been terrified too”, or, “I’m sure you did the best you could”. I don’t think most of us would heap condemnation on such a person. Yet that is exactly what John felt. His fear drove him to question his faith. After all, if he truly believed he was saved by Jesus Christ, what business did he have to be afraid of the end of this life? Moreover, in the midst of the storm, Wesley witnessed the reaction of a group of German believers. He writes: READ pg. 31

**SLIDE 4: Boat**

This statement sort of haunted Wesley. He knew he should not fear, he knew perfect love casts out fear and yet he could not escape the truth that he was in fact fearful. Overall Wesley trip to Georgia was a disaster. He was hardly even given the chance to speak with any native Indians. During his voyage back to England, facing again the specter of the sea, Wesley wrote in his journal, “I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! Who shall convert me?...I can talk well; nay, and believe myself, while no danger is near; but let death look me in the face, and my spirit is troubled. Nor can I say, ‘To die is gain!’ I have the sin of fear…Who will deliver me from this fear of death? Should I fight against it by thinking or by not thinking of it?”

How many of you know that fear is a sin? Fear is a sin because it dishonors God. Fear is a sin because it distrusts God. Fear is a sin because fear insists that we be in control. Wesley, a preacher, a Methodist, a man of God, was fearful. I imagine he was a type A personality. I imagine he was highly organized and regimented in the way he conducted his life. I imagine he was comfortable being in control. In fact, a good friend of Wesley’s, Henry Moore started that he never saw a “misplaced book or a scrap of paper lying about in Wesley’s study.” And he was always neatly dressed. All that sense of propriety and organization goes out the window when one is surrendered to the mercy of the billowing ocean. With all sense of control taken from him, Wesley met with fear. What is it that you fear? When has control been taken from you?

Wesley admits, his fearfulness is sinful; it belies a full trust in God. Wesley knew the words of the Apostle John from 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.”

**SLIDE 5: 1 John 4:18: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment. The person who is afraid has not been made perfect in love.”**

Then there is the writer of Hebrews, laying out what Jesus did for us in chapter 2 verses 14-15: “Therefore, since the children [that’s us] share in flesh and blood, he [that’s Jesus] also shared the same things in the same way. He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death – the devil – by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.”

**SLIDE 6: “Who will deliver me from this fear of death?”**

So when Wesley asks, “Who will deliver me from this fear of death?” hopefully that sounds familiar because it echoes the apostle Paul. In Romans chapter 7 Paul askes the same question, ‘Who will deliver me from this body of death?” But note the difference in the answers of these two men… Wesley, trying to retain his grasp of control on the situation starts to analyze his fear. He wants to know how to fight against it. Should he pursue his fear by mulling it over and rationally picking it apart until it is no more? Or should he avoid thinking about it and hope that through this concentrated effort, his fear will eventually dissipate. To Wesley, it seemed that some sort of thought process would be integral to dismantling his fear. But now look at what Paul says in Romans 7:24 and 25, “I’m a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And Paul’s answer, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Paul erupts into thanksgiving and praise because he knows full well that the solution to his problem does not lay in himself, but in fact comes from God alone. In Christ we are made free from sin and death and any kind of fear. No amount of thinking or rationalizing or strategizing will do. We need Christ and Christ alone!

**SLIDE 7: We need Christ and Christ alone!**

So John Wesley carries on his preaching ministry though he wonders if he ought to hang it up and do something else. He knows he is an unworthy vessel and that he has no business telling others to trust in Jesus when he himself cannot seem to muster the same. In one conversation with his mentor, Peter Bohler, Wesley admitted his doubts about preaching. He asked Peter, “What can I preach?” and Peter replied, “Preach faith till you have it; and then because you have it, you will preach faith.” He said, “Do not hide in the earth the talent God has given you.” So, Wesley continued on expounding the promises found in God’s word.

And then on Wednesday night in 1738 Wesley, feeling heavy in heart, reluctantly attended a church meeting on Aldersgate Street. During that gathering, someone was sharing from Martin Luther’s preface to the book of Romans. The words read described the change that God can work in the heart of those who believe in Christ, and in that moment, God reached out and touched John Wesley. He writes, “I felt my heart strangly warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given to me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” John was able to join with Paul in his declaration, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

**SLIDE 8: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”**

Now, notice a few things here. John Wesley, though a pastor and church leader, still needed to be fully converted. He was blessed with a vision of his sin, his own fear of death, his own distrust in God’s gift of salvation. This sin he wrestled with for quite a while before he was led by Christ to a place of complete trust and forgiveness. These are all parts of conversion and, it goes to show, that these steps do not happen all at once. Our faith life is a journey and God will lead each of us in different ways and at different times. John Wesley’s was not a journey from utter rejection of God to someone who dedicated their life to the gospel. Wesley was already committed to serving the Lord, but his heart had some areas that needed attending. And we see God leading him slowly through the process of revealing his sin, struggling with the sin, questioning his own use as a pastor and finally, being fully redeemed and set free from that sin. We know that Wesley was filled with a great vision and mission for God’s kingdom as he went on to establish the Methodist movement which was characterized by a strong sense of holiness, that is sinless living, and was and is used by God the world over to bring countless people into relationship with him.

But there is one more thing to note from John Wesley’s story, and that is his experience directly following his heart being strangely warmed. Wesley writes, “It was not long before the enemy suggested, ‘This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?...if thou dost believe, why is there not a more sensible change?’ I answered (yet not I), ‘That I know not. But, this I know, I have ‘now peace with God.’

**SLIDE 9: ‘That I know not. But, this I know, I have ‘now peace with God.’**

My friends, we have an enemy. We have one who does not want faith to flourish, who wants to keep us in fear, who wants to keep us questioning the goodness of God. The enemy is going to keep pushing these questions… “Why not more results? Why aren’t you better? Why can’t you achieve? Why do you feel so defeated, deflated, and distressed?” Can we learn a lesson from John Wesley this morning and face the devil when he comes with a barrage of doubts and accusations and say loudly and clearly, “The answer to your questions, I don’t know. But one thing I do know, I have peace with God.” Can you claim that in your heart and soul? Can you claim that aloud with your mouth. “I have peace with God!”

Now, don’t lie…there are some of us here for whom it is simply not true. There are some of us, Like John Wesley, who are stuck in fear. Maybe you do not have that assurance of salvation, maybe peace with God is not quite there. I want to encourage you today, to come down to the altar here this morning, take a seat in this front row and just come before the Lord. There is no amount of thinking to be done, there is no fighting this fear on your own. Come to the Lord in prayer and find peace in him. Kick fear to the curb and allow Jesus to reign in your heart. I want to encourage you to come.