

Call to Worship

All-knowing, all-wise God, we gather as a people who need your direction to live wisely, and your strength to live faithfully.

You have shown us the way in Jesus, and imprinted his name upon us who choose to follow him. We celebrate today with gratitude for the gift of his Spirit, and pray to grow to imitate him in character and purpose, for his name's sake.

Prayer of Invocation

God beyond all time and in all time, God of the generations, we thank you for your faithfulness to your people age after age. Teach us to honor one another as you honor us. As we celebrate the wonder of your love together this day, gift us anew with your dream and vision for our lives, the church and the world. Amen.

The Word Ephesians 2:4-10

God is rich in mercy. He brought us to life with Christ while we were dead as a result of those things that we did wrong. He did this because of the great love that he has for us. You are saved by God's grace! **And God raised us up and seated us in the heavens with Christ Jesus. God did this to show future generations the greatness of his grace by the goodness that God has shown us in Christ Jesus.**

You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. This salvation is God's gift. It's not something you possessed. It's not something you did that you can be proud of. **Instead, we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives.**

Living the Word

When a cattle rancher wants to keep his beef cattle and horses from being rustled by bandits, they start a good hot wood fire to heat up the branding irons. When the irons get red hot, they are pulled from the fire and used to mark the cattle and horses with that Ranch's unique branding mark so everyone will know who they belong to.

I know all of this because several times in my life I have helped with the branding...Do you know what happens if you don't have a fire with enough energy to properly heat the branding irons – well then you have 'too many irons in the fire!' What can that have to do with John Wesley from the 1700's? 'Hold on to your horses' and we will get to that part of his story...

To understand John Wesley's thoughts and beliefs, we need to know something of the world into which he was born, for it was that world that shaped the Methodist movement.

For 200 years leading up to Wesley's birth, Europe had been in the throes of religious conflict. In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He was a Catholic monk, protesting against the Catholic Church and their practice of that time of charging people money to be forgiven. This and a number of other complaints against common practices of the church began a revolution. Lines were drawn between those who were loyal to the Pope and the Roman Catholic Church, and those who joined Luther's protest and became protest-ants, Protestants.

In England the more immediate source of conflict was the desire by King Henry the VIII to produce a male heir. He sought to have his marriage annulled so that he could marry again, and when that effort failed he severed ties between the English church and Rome. By 1534, Henry had himself declared the Supreme Head of the Church of England, and by 1538 an act was passed to disband most of the monasteries and convents.

Though Henry's Church of England was no longer tied to the Roman Catholic Church, its theology and practice remained far more Catholic than those of the other protestant countries of that time. After Henry, his son, Edward VI led the church to a closer alignment with what was becoming mainline Protestantism.

Edward died young and his half-sister Mary I came to the throne. She was a staunch Roman Catholic and restored the Church of England to Catholic doctrine and practice and to the Pope's authority. Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth I, who ruled for nearly 45 years and returned England to a firmly Protestant path.

Is this too much history for you? You don't have to remember all of this, but try to keep in your head what is happening to the church...Onward! When Elizabeth died in 1603 she was followed by James VI, the king of Scotland, who also became James I, the king of England and Ireland. He sought a balance between Catholicism and Protestantism. James supported a new translation of the Bible in England, which came to be known as The King James Version.

During that same time, a movement had arisen among the more ardent Protestants, who came to be known as Puritans. The saga continued with arguments over the how and why of religion in England. Because of this 200 year period, until the 1700's, of religious upheaval, many among the English people had grown weary of religion.

This was the perfect setting for revival in which John Wesley would play so prominent a part. John learned about faith from his mother, but he learned how to deal with disagreements from his father and grandfathers. In many ways those two generations of Wesley's family reflected the religious conflicts still going on in that time. Both of John's grandfathers – mother and father's side were religious nonconformists, rejecting the authority or practice of the established Church of England of their time. They were named 'dissenters,' as somebody who disagrees with the beliefs of the majority. They had been strongly influenced by the Puritans. John's parents were committed to The Church of England, deeply devoted to the established church with its high liturgy.

John chose a middle way that found truth on both sides of this theological divide. He was a minister of the Church of England, yet he embraced many Puritan expressions of faith. He worshiped in the big-church tradition, yet he opened preaching houses that were filled with exciting and moving hymn singing and little liturgy. He had the ability to value and listen to people on opposite sides of the theological divide, to find the truth that each one had, and to live and preach a middle way, embracing the best of both sides.

In one of his most famous sermons, entitled "Catholic Spirit," John wrote, "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." This seems to fit in well as we begin to acknowledge this week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Keep Wesley's words in your mind this week: "Though we can't think alike, may we not love alike?"

One of the other lessons John learned from his family, mostly his father, Samuel, was one to become essential in the revival that John would lead: When suffering, tragedy and opposition come, don't turn away from God. And don't give up.

John's parents knew grief, hard times and hurt. They lost nine of their nineteen children at birth or in early childhood. It would be easy as a parent to turn from God in those circumstances. Instead they found strength

and hope by not putting the blame on God, but trusting that God was holding their children and wouldn't let go.

John's father, Samuel was the minister for 40 years at St Andrew's Church in Epworth, where the family was raised. The salary he received wasn't sufficient for their large family. Mother Susanna often wrote in her letters of them going without as there was little money.

In addition Samuel had a knack for upsetting some of his parishioners. Many of the local people resented the king, yet Samuel still supported the king. Samuel and John's mother, Susanna were both educated and came from the city, but they were serving in a rural parish. At times Samuel may have been tactless in his preaching and for other reasons, there were those who didn't like him.

One story is of Samuel upsetting one of the parishioners that he owed money to. The man demanded payment, but Samuel couldn't pay, so he was thrown in debtors' prison. The congregation could have raised the funds to cover his debt and have him released, but there he sat for three months until the Bishop finally came and bailed him out. While there he wrote to his children in good humor saying that his imprisonment was giving him the opportunity to minister to his fellow 'jailbirds.'

In 1709, when John was just five years old, someone set fire to the thatched roof of their house while the family slept. The house burned so quickly that the Wesley's barely escaped with their lives. When they got out they took inventory and discovered that one child was missing. It was John. Samuel tried to go back in the burning building, but the fire was too large, so he knelt with his children and praying, commended little John to God's care. Then one of the townsfolk who had gathered - spotted John standing in a second story window; one man climbed onto someone's shoulder and they pulled John to safety just as the roof collapsed.

Susanna and later John came to believe that God had saved him for some special purpose. Quoting Zechariah 3:2, his mother called him 'a brand plucked from the fire.' John understood his life to have been spared by God for some great purpose, and this sense of destiny was what he believed he had found in leading the people called Methodists.

Wesley traveled 250,000 miles on foot, on horseback and by carriage, often preaching out of doors in the streets and fields and markets, proclaiming the good news of God's love and grace and calling people to trust in Christ and to be born anew. Too often, Christians have thought that the goal of faith is just to be born again and then develop 'a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.'

John knew that though these were essential, he also believed that if that was the only goal – it was too self-focused. The next step that had to be taken is to live out that relationship through works of mercy – for others. Sanctification is being perfected in Christian love. We know 'The Golden Rule' from Matthew 7:12 *"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."*

'Works of mercy is taken from Jesus' Parable of the Sheep and Goats: feed the hungry, provide drink for the thirsty, clothe the naked, care for the homeless, visit the sick, and minister to the prisoner. John believed that with these acts of mercy, God is working in and through us for others and they become a blessing for us. Our own actions become the instrument God uses to change us.

It began for John at Oxford, now a Fellow - graduate mentor to under grads, he had begun meeting with students in a small group where they attended to prayer and scripture reading. One of the students encouraged John to join him in visiting the prison. Soon, John also, was regularly ministering to prisoners. His journals record that the schedule for 1731 visitations were like this: "Monday, Bocardo Prison; Tuesday, Castle

Prison; Wednesday, the children; Thursday, Castle Prison; Friday, Bocardo Prison; Saturday, Castle Prison; Sunday, the poor and elderly.

Wesley's written words have become defining elements of Methodism: ministering to prisoners, helping impoverished children, visiting the elderly, and caring for the poor. Later as John began to field preach to the miners when they got off work, he felt called to begin a school for the poor children of miners and anyone else, regardless of age, who wanted to learn.

Education was important to the early Methodists. It was a ticket out of poverty and also a tool to make students more effective for God's use in a changing world. As Methodism spread in 18th and 19th century America, that tradition continued. In addition to public schools, American Methodists started hundreds of colleges and universities. Some of those better known institutions of higher learning founded by Methodists are: Southern Methodist, Duke, Emory, Northwestern, Drew, Boston University and the University of Southern California, just to name a few.

In November of 1739, Wesley had preached outdoors to seven or eight thousand people at the former site of a cannon foundry that was dilapidated and in disrepair. The building was purchased and renovated and would become the home of Methodism in London for the next 38 years.

One of John's new ventures was to make small loans, akin to today's micro-lending, and the fund made loans to 250 people in the first year. On Fridays, the poor who were sick came to be treated and were provided basic medical care. Wesley and the Methodists at the Foundry leased two houses for the poor and elderly widows and their children.

Hundreds if not thousands of inner-city ministries, medical clinics, hospitals, orphanages, and more have been started across the United States, Great Britain, and around the world by Methodists who are carrying on the traditions established at The Foundry. In the Wesleyan tradition, Christians continue to go on mission trips and serve in medical clinics around the world. As Proverbs 31:8-9 tells us: "*Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute, speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*"

Pastor Adam Hamilton at the mega United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Kansas says this: "We pray, *"your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven,"* and we are meant to work and act accordingly. As we look around us, we see the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be...

What's interesting is that in today's world, young adults who have turned away from 'organized religion' are joining groups engaged in helping the world look like the Kingdom of God...And when the church is actually being the church, engaged in serving others and not simply focused on individual salvation, then young adults begin to see the church in a different light."

So we have begun a Wesley journey for four weeks. There are way more stories to tell, more than we will have time for. Wesley wrote a prayer of covenant with God, which is often used as we begin a new year. I would like us to say it together: **Wesley Covenant Prayer** (modern version)

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or criticized for you. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and fully surrender all things to your hope and service. And now, O glorious and blessed God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine, and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be made also in heaven. Amen.