

Call to Worship

Our relationship to God, our salvation, is something that God in Christ does for us, not something we think, or feel, or understand by ourselves.

God reaches out to us, not because we are good at being godly, but because it is the nature of this God to save sinners.

We are among the gifted – those who have been given something by God that we could never, by our own efforts or merits, have by ourselves.

We can worship, because we are saved by grace.

Prayer of Invocation

We look to the heavens to seek our help, but you remind us, O God, our help is in you, and you are here among us. We gather to receive and to give, to pray and to be prayed for, to encourage and for encouragement. Here we are, grateful for the full measure of grace that we share. Abide with us, Saving God, in our worship today. We pray this, constant in praise. Amen.

The Word

John 3:10-12; 16-18 Common English Bible

"Jesus answered, "You are a teacher of Israel and you don't know these things?"

I assure you that we speak about what we know and testify about what we have seen, but you don't receive our testimony.

If I have told you about earthly things and you don't believe, how will you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life. God didn't send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him isn't judged; whoever doesn't believe in him is already judged, because they don't believe in the name of God's only Son."

Living the Word

I don't remember much about Sunday School when I was little, beyond the wonderful slide they had for us to play on in the nursery and learning the Lord's Prayer at age 5 and being able then to recite it with the whole congregation during worship. I don't remember the name of the teacher who taught us, but I envision her as small and old. (I wonder if that is what they would say now of me...)

When my boys were young, we were members of the newly formed Hayward United Methodist Church. There were five children and no teachers. The Pastor's wife had a degree in Christian Education, but was shy around the children, so I agreed to teach with her. The church had no money for Sunday School Curriculum so we wrote our own and planned the classes.

I wanted my boys, and the other children, to have the basics to grow their faith. We are forever blessed by those who take the time to teach us about the faith. It becomes the tools we rely on in the difficult times, the knowledge that helps us make sense when there is no sense, because God is still with us. As teachers we are especially blessed when we hear the children saying the Lord's Prayer with us in worship...

The Wesley children also had their mother for their teacher of Christian Education. She spent time with anyone who wanted to learn, along with her own eleven children, so they would know God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The quote on the front of the bulletin gives us a quick insight into the person of John Wesley.

“I learned more about Christianity from my mother, than from all the theologians in England.” His whole ministry is a mix of deep theological thoughts from all of his educational pursuits and years of deep discussions with other who studied and tried to understand God and beliefs and the simple understandings of faith and love he learned at the beginning of his faith journey.

John Wesley was, and is, so well known because he made effective use of the printing press, which was the best way, besides his preaching, to get his views known about salvation, the Christian life, and the transformation of society. His aim was always to put into the hands of his Methodist follower and preachers what he considered ‘plain truth for plain people,’ literature to enhance their experience of God’s grace, deepen their knowledge of the faith, and at the same time challenge them to live a more holy life.

He didn’t think that he was introducing anything new or innovative in his understanding of the Christian faith. He accepted and used the same methods of theological thought that was already a part of the Church of England. Among these were reliance on Scripture, tradition, reason and experience as the main sources for understanding what a Christian and the Christian community should be and do.

Scripture: Wesley considered the Bible to be the primary source of Christian belief and life. He wrote, “I will not, I dare not, vary from this book, either in great things or small. I have no power to dispense with one jot or tittle of what is contained therein. I am determined to be a Bible Christian, not almost, but altogether.”

Of course John didn’t mean that there were no other books worthy of Christian reading and study. He was an avid reader of a variety of literature, which he eagerly turned to whenever he could. He did believe, however, that the Bible was of utmost importance for him and for every Christian who took faith seriously.

All of his basic theological convictions were rooted in the scriptures. The other three sources – tradition, reason and experience, were necessary to interpret the Bible, to assist the Christians in their understanding of it and to put the message into practice in their lives. John believed that the Bible was inspired by God and should be read prayerfully and with the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Since it is the Holy Spirit that works for good within each of us, it makes sense that asking for help from God in understanding the Bible is a good thing. Wesley was concerned that some were pulling out a verse here and there to use in their own context without exploring and knowing the setting in which they were originally written; finding each verses placement within a story and as a whole what its meaning was within the whole Book.

Tradition: Wesley had both admiration and love for the history of the church. The Epworth Rectory, his schooling at Oxford, and his study of the great men and women of the church history made an important impression on his own thinking about Christianity. He was especially devoted to the earliest church writers as he found them to be faithful in their interpretations of the scriptures. He thought their views to be worthy considerations for Christians of every age.

His commitment to these writings are best illustrated in his editing and publishing of a fifty-volume work entitled *A Christian Library*, which included selected readings from Christian authors from the second century to his own. Authors today write books to hopefully make a good income. Wesley gave the income from all of his may writings back to the poor and needy.

Reason: The 18th century is known as the Age of Reason, a time when it was believed that truth could only be known through reason, observation, and scientific experiment. While acknowledging the existence of a Supreme Being, the popular movement doubted the possibility of miracles, that Christ was Divine (of God), and Jesus' death as salvation from sin.

John found himself caught between two opinions in the matter of reason and religion. On the one hand those who did not sufficiently appreciate reason as one of God's good gifts. They valued emotional intensity and undervalued reason, considering an enemy of religion. Wesley argued that it wasn't so. A growing faith continues to find ways to be grounded in sound reason and understanding. Faith and reason are not adversaries.

On the other hand, were thinkers who overvalued reason and denied the epiphanies, the 'ah ha' moments as coming from God as a source of truth. Wesley argued that though reason is a divine gift and important to the study of the Bible and a way to analyze Christian tradition, it had limits when it came to understanding the mysterious nature of God and what God does. By itself, reason can't produce faith, hope, or love, and therefore, can't give happiness. Even today, some people argue very fervently for and against reason, for example, in debates that s we here continue to define science and evolution ...

Experience: Wesley was constantly concerned about the role of experience in Christian theology. He was afraid that his followers would become satisfied with a spiritually dormant prevailing attitude that had none of the energy and power of a personal relationship with God. In 1786 he wrote "I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist, either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power."

He tried to convince his followers that true religion depends on God's grace and is blessed by the vital sense of God's presence. The presence of God is experienced by the believer in two ways. We have an outward experience of God as we observe God at work in nature and in the lives of other people.

We also have an inward experience of God, in which we sense the divine presence working in our lives, assuring us that we are a child of God and leading us to be more like Christ in how we live our lives. God's presence brings an inner consciousness of love, joy and peace. If it is for real it also is seen by a change in the behavior and actions of the believer.

For his emphasis on experience, Wesley was labeled and 'enthusiast' by some of his critics. They accused him of promoting dangerously unregulated and misdirected religious emotion. John denied that he promoted disordered and misleading religious emotionalism. He knew the importance of religious experience. He knew that people yearned to know God's presence at the deepest levels of their lives and that God seeks to come to them in a personal relationship.

Thursday afternoon, as I was driving the same route home that I drive most every day, suddenly there was a pheasant that flew out of the ditch and then behind my car. I just saw the movement and then a long bird

with many colors within the brown tail as it soared past me. It startled me, but a moment later it became a reminder of God's beauty and how I need to be gently startled to the alertness of God's presence.

I see a lot of unique birds in my travels, and I used to relate an eagle sighting to God's presence. This time it was a pheasant, with a different elegance than an eagle. Now I know that it is easy to miss all of the places inwardly, as well as outwardly, that I miss God as I forge ahead on my own agenda each day. How many experiences have happened in my life that God placed there just for me and I was looking the other way? How many stirrings of my heart have been brushed aside because I didn't take time to process where they were from?

In seminary they taught us about this foursome that Wesley promoted. Though it came through the Church of England to Wesley, it is now fondly known as "Wesley's Quadrilateral." Scripture is primary, but then the process goes through reason, tradition and experience as we process life. When I have and take the time to process events and decisions within these four ways, I can see a bigger picture of my Creator.

For instance, let's take the pheasant event. (Follow me here, and you will be able to do this yourself.) Scripture tells me that God created all things and found them to be good. God wants me to have good in my life, so this event may have been for my pleasure...Traditionally, the pheasant was at one time heavily populated in this part of the world, but between hunting and people moving in to the areas with less farms fields to feed them, the pheasant population has dwindled.

I know this because my husband raises them and the DNR said it would be OK, even great if some of them escaped the hunts and repopulated the Hayward area as they were once an indigenous bird of this area. Unfortunately, the birds we raise become domesticated and don't fly off to repopulate, but come back to their fenced enclosure because they know there is food there.

Still they are not all gone yet from places between here and Hayward, so it is reasonable to see them once in a while. When we use reason, we process the sense of it. Pheasants like to hang out along fence lines and ditches to glean any grain that the combine may have missed. It was also reasonable that the Pheasant didn't hit the car, as most birds will avoid objects when they are flying as long as it isn't a reflective window illusion that they might fly into.

In my experience, The Holy Spirit can and will use whatever it takes to bring our wandering attention back to God. I experienced the surprise and joy of the colorful, elegant event and I gave thanks to God for the moment. Our very fast brains can and often does, process all four of these sources of understanding in a few moments, some we acknowledge as a gift from God and some just are gone too soon as we move forward.

I invite you this week to process something in your life: a decision or a happening using the four sources – Scripture, tradition, reason and experience. If you think you don't know enough scripture to get started, start with the question "What would Jesus do?" and move on from there - how have others handled it in the past? Does it make sense and what experience have I had that helps me process this.

As we explore how God is a part of our everyday and high adventure times of our lives, we see our Creator working in us and with us every step of the way. Then the focus is moved from us to God and others. God wants to save you from yourself, you just have to earnestly seek God.