

**SERMON FOR ALDERSGATE SUNDAY****MAY 22, 2022 (ALDERSGATE DAY: 5/24/2022)****KAY FLOWERS**

Today is Aldersgate Sunday, the Sunday closest to May 24, the day John Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed,” and was fully equipped for his ministry. The scriptures shared today were read or heard by Wesley on this day. I have known and cherished this story for a long time. However, after seeing the movie on Wesley that was presented here a few years ago, I realized there was more to his experience based on his past. And I knew another story that offered insight into what Wesley experienced. So, let me tell you about Helen Keller.

**Helen Keller**

Helen Keller was born in Alabama in 1880. At the age of 19 months, a critical period in a child’s language development, she contracted an unidentified disease that caused fever and left her blind and deaf. Her family cared for her at home, and she eventually developed some home signs for communication.

In 1887, after consulting experts, her father hired a teacher, Anne Sullivan, who began working with Helen that year. She began to teach Helen to finger spell, using the manual alphabet, a set of hand positions for letters. For example, she would hand her a doll and spell d-o-l-l at the same time. Though somewhat rebellious, Helen began to imitate the finger spelling without realizing she was forming words. As depicted in the movie *The Miracle Worker*, a disturbance at the dining table resulted in a pitcher of water being spilled, and Anne took Helen out to the pump to refill the pitcher. As the water ran over Helen’s hand, Anne spelled w-a-t-e-r into her other hand. In her autobiography, Helen described the experience in this way:

"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, set it free!"

You may wonder what this has to do with Wesley. Consider the following description of her experience, and keep it in mind when hearing of Wesley’s. When Anne tried to teach Helen to finger spell, Helen mimicked the shapes of the letters but never connected them to any meaning. In a sense she was following the rules. She had all the pieces she needed to communicate, but they weren’t put together correctly. It was only after she connected water to the finger spelling of water that she realized the meaning behind the movements. Her response was excitement, and she ran around tapping on objects to find out their “names.” For those who do not know the end of the story, Helen Keller went on to earn a college degree, learned to speak, and wrote twelve books.

## Wesley

As I mentioned above, I have known the story of Wesley's Aldersgate experience for many years. But I did not know of the difficulties that preceded it, particularly those of the Atlantic crossing when he went to America. To illustrate these experiences, I looked up his journal. so that I could share with you more than the two sentences we usually hear about Aldersgate. So, I took selections from his journal, starting with the Atlantic Crossing.

### John Wesley's Journal

#### The Atlantic Crossing

Sunday, Nov. 23, 1735 —At night I was awakened by the tossing of the ship and roaring of the wind, and plainly showed I was unfit, for I was unwilling, to die.

Friday, Jan. 23, 1736—In the evening another storm began. In the morning it increased so that they were forced to let the ship drive. I could not but say to myself, "How is it that thou hast no faith?" being still unwilling to die.

Sunday, 25 —At noon our third storm began. At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behavior. Of their humility they had given a continual proof by performing those servile offices for the other passengers, which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, "it was good for their proud hearts," and "their loving Saviour had done more for them." And every day had given them an occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger and revenge.

In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterward, "Were you not afraid?" He answered, "I thank God, no." I asked, "But were not your women and children afraid?" He replied, mildly, "No; our women and children are not afraid to die."

#### After arriving in Georgia

Saturday, February 7, 1736—Mr. Oglethorpe returned from Savannah with Mr. Spangenberg, one of the pastors of the Germans. I soon found what spirit he was of and asked his advice with regard to my own conduct. He said, "My brother, I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?" I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it and asked, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" I paused and said, "I know He is the Saviour of the world." "True," replied he; "but do you know He has saved you?" I answered, "I hope He has died to save me." He only added, "Do you know yourself?" I said, "I do." But I fear they were vain words.

### The Journey Back to England

Tuesday, January 24, 1738. My mind was now full of thought; part of which I wrote down as follows:

"I went to America, to convert the Indians; but oh! who shall convert me? who, what is he that will deliver me from this evil heart of mischief? I have a fair summer religion. 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 a sin of fear, that when I've spun my last thread, I shall perish on the shore!

"I think, verily, if the gospel be true, I am safe: for I not only have given, and do give, all my goods to feed the poor; I not only give my body to be burned, drowned, or whatever God shall appoint for me; but I follow after charity (though not as I ought, yet as I can), if haply I may attain it. I now believe the gospel is true. 'I show my faith by my works' by staking my all upon it. I would do so again and again a thousand times, if the choice were still to make.

"Whoever sees me, sees I would be a Christian. Therefore 'are my ways not like other men's ways.' Therefore, I have been, I am, I am content to be, 'a by-word, a proverb of reproach.' But in a storm I think, 'What, if the gospel be not true? Then thou art of all men most foolish. For what hast thou given thy goods, thine ease, thy friends, thy reputation, thy country, thy life? For what art thou wandering over the face of the earth? --A dream! a cunningly devised fable!"

"Oh! who will deliver me from this fear of death? What shall I do? Where shall I fly from it? Should I fight against it by thinking, or by not thinking of it? A wise man advised me some time since, 'Be still and go on.' Perhaps this is best, to look upon it as my cross; when it comes to let it humble me and quicken all my good resolutions, especially that of praying without ceasing; and at other times to take no thought about it, but quietly to go on 'in the work of the Lord.'"

### Back in England

Sunday, May 7. —I preached at St. Lawrence's in the morning, and afterward at St. Katherine Cree's Church. I was enabled to speak strong words at both; and was therefore the less surprised at being informed that I was not to preach any more in either of those churches.

Sunday, 14. —I preached in the morning at St. Ann's, Aldersgate; and in the afternoon at the Savoy Chapel, free salvation by faith in the blood of Christ. I was quickly apprised that at St. Ann's, likewise, I am to preach no more

Wednesday, May 24, 1738 ans. In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for 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.

I began to pray with all my might for those who had in a more especial manner despitefully used me and persecuted me. I then testified openly to all there what I now first felt in my heart. But it was not long before the enemy suggested, “This cannot be faith; for where is thy joy?” Then was I taught that peace and victory over sin are essential to faith in the Captain of our salvation; but that, as to the transports of joy that usually attend the beginning of it, especially in those who have mourned deeply, God sometimes giveth, sometimes withholdeth, them according to the counsels of His own will.

*Charles Wesley recorded in his own journal that “towards 10 pm my brother was brought in triumph by a troop of our friends and declared ‘I believe.’ “*

Continuing with John:

After my return home, I was much buffeted with temptations, but I cried out, and they fled away. They returned again and again. I as often lifted up my eyes, and He “sent me help from his holy place.” And herein I found the difference between this and my former state chiefly consisted. I was striving, yea, fighting with all my might under the law, as well as under grace. But then I was sometimes, if not often, conquered; now, I was always conqueror.

Thursday, 25. —The moment I awakened, “Jesus, Master,” was in my heart and in my mouth; and I found all my strength lay in keeping my eye fixed upon Him and my soul waiting on Him continually. Being again at St. Paul’s in the afternoon, I could taste the good word of God ... Yet the enemy injected a fear, “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.’ And I sin not today, and Jesus my Master has forbidden me to take thought for the morrow.”

*Wesley later spent several months in Germany before returning to London.*

Friday, November 3.—I preached at St. Antholin’s; Sunday, 5th, in the morning, at St. Botolph’s, Bishopsgate; in the afternoon, at Islington; and in the evening, to such a congregation as I never saw before at St. Clement’s, in the Strand. As this was the first time of my preaching here, I suppose it is to be the last.

The following March 1739, Wesley received a message from George Whitfield to join him. After much consideration, he went. Whitfield introduced him to preaching in the fields. No longer did he have to worry about churches that would ask him not to preach there again. That year he preached to congregations of a thousand or more at a time. By the summer of 1739, he declared “I look upon the world as my parish.”

Wesley had lived a life of good works, following the rules. One example was the Holy Club he and Charles formed while at university, a group that held each other accountable to following rules. Previously you heard his statement “I show my faith by my works.” It was when he gave up that life, and accepted Christ’s grace, that he was equipped for ministry. He questions why he did not feel more joy such as others did, but he now knows, in his heart, that he has been saved, by grace, through faith in Christ.

I relate to Wesley in this situation. I too was raised in the church; I was taught what I “ought” to do. I prayed every night, and when I got tired of “now I lay me down to sleep,” I memorized Psalm 23 because I thought I ought to. I attended Sunday School, sang in choirs, made offerings, went through Confirmation Class, and participated in the youth group – all things that good church goers should do. I followed the rules or the expectations of membership. I did not realize something was missing.

Then, when I was fourteen, my church had a lay witness mission. This was a form of revival led by lay members of the Methodist church, and it took place during a weekend – a weekend I was at a Girl Scout camping trip. When I returned, I went to our Sunday evening service (yes, we had those back then). All my friends were there, but they had changed. The phrase they were using was “Smile God loves you and I love you too.” I realized that God loves me, Kay Flowers. It is the personal connection between me and God, knowing that Jesus died for me. Just following rules, or, as some might say, the law, is not enough.

But even Wesley was confronted with a lack of emotion. “Where is thy joy?” one asked him. At the time I realized God’s love for me, many were being converted with tears, loud praises, and speaking in tongues. My conversion, similar to Wesley’s, was quiet, a culmination of experiences that finally came together in a supreme truth. Louis Pasteur said that “chance favors the prepared mind.” I think it could be said of Wesley that God favors the prepared heart.

As Helen Keller could not make the connection between finger spelling and objects, Wesley found that following the rules, or the law, will not lead to the understanding of God’s grace. Yet all the parts were there, waiting for that last recognition of God’s love for us as individuals.

One last story will help illustrate God’s role in our new state. Mike Warnke, who described himself as a Christian comedian, related the story of how he felt called to the ministry soon after his conversion. He describes his basic “reverend rig: a double knit, double breasted, double vested suit with two-inch cuffs and white shoes with Pat Boone’s picture on the toes. This was, after all, the 1970s. However, when he went out to preach, he failed. Upon returning home, he said his knees hit the floor in his living room and slid up to his bed where he started a dialog with God that began “GOD! What did you do wrong?” A gentle voice replied

“Not me, you.”

Then Mike said, “I don’t understand. I did what you told me to.”

“No, you did what you wanted to do but in my name.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Results.”

I am reminded of Wesley continuing to preach in churches and asked not to return. When listening to God’s direction, and preaching in the fields, and not his own version of what appears “right,” preaching in churches, he found results.

So, what is the upshot? Following the rules, the laws, or doing good works is not enough. We cannot earn our way into Heaven. It is his grace, and our acceptance of that grace, that finally puts the pieces together, creating a personal relationship, that we might live in him, and he in us.

I would like to close with Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—<sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

As a response to this message, I invite you to turn in your hymnals to the poem on page 58. When first published, this poem was titled “For the Anniversary Day of One’s Conversion,” for Charles wrote it in 1739, the year after his conversion on May 21, 1738. Let us join our voices on verses 1-7 celebrating our own realization of God’s love for us and his unending grace.