

Have You Been to Aldersgate Lately?
Isaiah 6:1-9a, Mark 12:34, II Peter 1:4
May 24, 2009

I have been to Aldersgate Street in London a couple of times, but I will never forget my first trip. As a 5th generation Methodist I had heard about it. While in seminary I learned all about it, and now I was finally on my way.

Shortly after Madeline and I were married, we decided to lead the youth group and youth handbell choir from our church in Rochester on a two week tour of England. London was the first stop on our Wesleyan Heritage Tour.

Our first youth led performance was at Wesley Chapel in London. After the service we received a guided tour of Wesley's home next door. John Wesley is buried behind his chapel mission and home. Today the gravesite is overshadowed by the towering skyscrapers of London.

It is amazing it even survived the Nazi bombing of London. The upkeep and renovation of most Methodist sites in England is largely due to vast cash gifts from American Methodist Churches.

But to finally get to Aldersgate Street, one really needs a guide! The street and exact location of John Wesley's "heart warming experience" is very hard to find. Having learned this from previous pilgrims, I secured the help of Dr. John Vickers, world renowned Wesleyan historian, author and then curator at the Wesley Chapel.

Dr. Vickers led our group by foot from the Chapel, across the street and through Bunhill Cemetery (the burial grounds for most of the great English dissenters- George Fox (Quaker founder), Isaac Watts (hymn writer), John Bunyan (Pilgrim's Progress) and Susannah Wesley (mother of John, Charles and 17 other children!)

Once through the cemetery the lanes continue to wind through old London town past the standing remains of Roman Walls built in the 1st century. Finally we arrived at a spot on Aldersgate Street where 271 years ago on this very day John Wesley had his religious conversion...

The entire neighborhood has gone through many changes in the past 271 years, especially during post- WW II redevelopment. But low on a wall immediately north of the Museum of London is a bronze plaque provided by my Alma Mater Drew University. The plaque reads:

"The probable site, where on May 24, 1738 John Wesley "felt his heart strangely warmed". This experience of Grace was the beginning of Methodism."

Achieves, dust historical records and sites, tales of by gone people do not excite of inspire youth and adults unless history opens a window to our souls.

What happened to John Wesley 271 years ago today may be mildly interesting and worthy on this Memorial Day weekend. But it can also be a LIGHT, a SPARK, and a CALL to our spiritual formation.

Today let's recall what took place back then- and then ask: what does it mean for us today- here at Franklin Church.

John Wesley's own hand written journal entry on that day is easily the most familiar passage in all of Wesley's writings.

In the Methodist tradition, it stands as the equivalent of St. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus or St. Augustine's conversion in a Milan garden.

Peter Bohler, a Moravian teacher/preacher had been influencing Wesley the then 35 year old Wesley.

At the time John Wesley was already an Anglican priest with all the necessary tools- an excellent mind, disciplined religious upbringing as the son and grandson of Church of England priests. Wesley also possessed a genuine devotion to doing God's work.

But even as an Oxford graduate, professor and ordained priest there was a disturbing element in Wesley's life and spirit. He had the hope of salvation-but lacked the inner assurance. By 1738 religious revival was spreading across England and both John and his brother Charles had plunged into it.

John was actively preaching and teaching at Lincoln College, Oxford University. Earlier John went as a missionary to the newest British Colony in Savannah, Georgia. As a missionary he had little success. The Church of England sent Wesley to Savannah to convert Native Americans to Christianity. But Wesley found the British colonists living there were the problem; not the Indians!

Returning to London Wesley preached in 9 different churches, always with a fighting mood about him. He was searching for something he could not find. His old friend the Moravian Peter Bohler described John Wesley in a letter dated March of 1738.

“(Wesley) was a poor soul, who has a broken heart and who hungers after a better life than that which he has had up till now.”

Boy that description fits some people I know. I see it in the faces of people struggling day to day. People church hopping or shopping, discontented with their spiritual lives; or their lives in general.

Haven't you like John Wesley left a spiritual Georgia many times in your lives?

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You may be angrily searching for a dream church, or your heart to be filled or that great reward.

Haven't you known a broken heart, a hunger for a better relationship with God?
I have and at times still do!

On with Wesley's story. Finally John Wesley became convinced that he should and could renounce all dependence upon his own good deeds to find faith. Wesley started believing this even though there were still moments of coldness of heart and relapses in his faith and actions.

So it was at 5:00 AM on May 24, 1738 he began his daily devotions by opening his Bible to II Peter 1:4: "There are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, even that you should be partakers of the Divine nature..." Later on in the day Wesley opened his Bible to Mark 12:34: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

That evening Wesley went to the Evening Song service at St. Paul's Cathedral where the choir sang the "De Profundis" from the 130 Psalm: "out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord..."

The time had come. John Wesley was ready. Wesley recorded in his own daily journal which he kept his entire life: "In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society meeting on Aldersgate Street-where one was reading Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.

About a quarter to nine, while he (Luther) was describing the changes God works in the heart through faith, 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..."

There it is-the famous Aldersgate experience. You have now heard it. It was dramatic, life changing; a turning point in John Wesley's faith. The identifiable moment when Divine assurance was given that the principle he preached was now really true for his own life.

Maybe some of you have heard a sermon or message shared where the speaker told of their conversion experience? Maybe it was in church, or it was a prayer offered for release from your pain-maybe it was at such and such a time-in such and such a place.

Some people talk about the exact moment of their conversion. Some refer to it as being born again. But many in our Franklin congregation (including myself) do not point to a particular life changing event.

There are those of us who were baptized as infants, confirmed as teenagers, joined a church; but cannot hold up an exact and certain moment. I like to refer to my own personal conversion as gradual, a daily acceptance with no specific instance when the rush of an inner awareness overwhelmed me.

Which are you? Are you an Aldersgate Christian? If so where were you when it happened? How old were you? Did you know immediately? Was your conversion as memorable as B.C. and A.D.?

Or are you a many splendor Christian? Have there been a variety of exchanges with God- none of which you can point to as unique among the others?

We should rejoice today in the history of May 24, 1738. We thank God that John Wesley's life took such a complete turn and that the good news he preached became an inner assurance.

But let me add something about Wesley's Aldersgate experience. You remember me telling you he kept a personal diary for his entire life? Wesley even 271 years ago had a problem with the term "Born Again". He did not believe that one minute you're a sinner- and boom- the next minute your not!

John Wesley always questioned over simplicity. Wesley never believed that either you're a Christian or your not. Wesley never believed that Christian conversion makes all pain and doubt disappear. It is very important to point out that John Wesley made just one other reference to that Aldersgate Experience in all his writings for the rest of his life.

Wesley lived to be 88 years old!

We modern Methodist make a bigger deal out of it than Wesley did!

For the rest of his life Wesley was subject to moods of spiritual doubt and weakness (Mother Theresa's personal writings have relieved the same thing.) Through out the rest of his life Wesley was honest enough to record that "the enemy" was still tugging at his soul.

Even after his religious conversion if Wesley could have doubts about his faith, what about us? If the immortal father of Methodism, some historians say the greatest religious figure of the 18th century could slip and slide, is there any hope for us?

The answer is a resounding YES! For what happened to John Wesley that night 271 years ago is wonderfully available in many forms to all of us. My own experiences have taught me that on many occasions we can receive a deep and abiding awareness that God loves us.

Your response may be emotional or calm, your conversion may be dramatic, or it may be an ongoing knowledge that you are forgiven and loved.

We need to be to our Aldersgate.

I don't know where it was, where it is, or where it will be.
I don't know if you will have one or many Aldersgate encounters.
But I do know that we all need to receive the unmistakable message God offers.

You can unload your guilt, your shame, your fear, your selfishness and pride.

Quit playing around with faith.
Franklin Church is more than attendance, more than committees, more than a friendly place. Even being a Christian your whole life or just one day is not the issue.

But the fire, the drive, the joy that comes from God through the teachings of Jesus can be real to you, real to me, that is the difference.

Have you been to Aldersgate lately?
Are you avoiding coming to grips with this opportunity?
I invite you to walk with me. If you haven't already let's start today.
There is safety and security in traveling together.

The prophet Isaiah said: "I heard the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send, and you will go for us?"

The John Wesley said, then all those others said...then I said, here I am! Send me... and God said, go!

Have you been to Aldersgate lately? God is waiting.

Amen!