

“A MOVEMENT BORN IN FIRE”
(Pentecost/Aldersgate Day)
Acts 2:1-21

Today is a very special day. Today is May 24, which is Aldersgate Day – a very important day for us United Methodists. Today is also Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Easter, the day when God poured out the Holy Spirit on the early church.

It’s a rare and exciting occasion when both of those things happen on the same day. Pentecost is the birthday of the church. Aldersgate Day could be considered the birthday of Methodism.

The common theme between both of those events is FIRE.

On the day of Pentecost, the first Christians were huddled together in a room praying. And all of a sudden they heard the sound of a rushing wind. And they saw tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. And the next thing they knew they were out in the streets proclaiming the good news in languages they had never learned.

Pentecost is the day the Holy Spirit came in fire. And throughout the Scriptures, FIRE is a sign of the presence of God:

- God spoke to Moses through a bush that was on FIRE.
- God led his people through the desert in a pillar of FIRE.
- When God gave the Ten Commandments, Mt. Sinai was on FIRE.
- When Solomon’s temple was dedicated, the presence of God was manifested in FIRE.
- When Elijah faced the prophets of Baal on Mt Carmel, the Lord consumed his offering in FIRE.
- When John the Baptist came preaching in the desert, he said, “The One who comes after me will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with FIRE.”

Fire is a sign of the presence of God. When the Holy Spirit came in fire, that was the birthday of the church. *The church is a movement born in FIRE.*

And you know what else? Methodism is a movement born in fire.

It started with a little boy 6 years old asleep in a bed that had curtains around it. He woke up to what he thought was sunlight. The light on the other side of his curtains was as bright as day. He puts his head out – and sees streaks of fire shooting across the ceiling. The boy runs to the door and opens it, but the whole rest of the house is on fire. He runs over to the window, but his room is on the second floor, and he's too little to jump that far.

But somebody on the ground below looks up and sees the boy's frightened face in the window, and he says, "Look! Somebody's still in there! I'll go get a ladder!" And then somebody else on the ground says, "No, there won't be time – let's make a human ladder" – and that man stands against the wall and braces himself, and another man climbs up on his shoulders, and they get the boy out.

And at that very second, the roof of the burning house comes crashing down. The little boy is saved in the nick of time.

Later his mother said to him, "John, you are 'a brand plucked from the burning.' God has saved you for a special purpose." And *John Wesley* never forgot those words.

He thought maybe his purpose was to go to America and preach the gospel to the Indians. So he studied at Oxford University, got ordained in the Church of England, and hitched a ride with General James Oglethorpe, and came over here to Georgia to preach to the Native Americans.

John Wesley's mission to the Indians was a resounding...FAILURE. Nobody was converted. No church was planted. And he made the English colonists so mad at him that he had to sneak out one night under cover of darkness and catch a ride back to England.

At this point, poor John was lower than a snake's belly. He was so depressed, he wasn't even sure *he* was a Christian! On the way back from Georgia, he wrote in his journal, "*I went to America to convert the Indians. But O! Who shall convert me?*"

Back in England, Wesley was moping along – discouraged, depressed, not sure what to preach, not even sure he was saved. And then *on this very day 277 years ago* -- God lit a FIRE in the heart of John Wesley:

"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 to nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ,

I felt my heart strangely warmed..."

Now, understand, for an eighteenth century Oxford-educated Englishman – that's pretty emotional stuff! That would be like me jumping up and down and saying, "WOW! My heart is on FIRE!"

Wesley went on to say, “...an assurance was given me that Christ had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

May 24, 1738 -- John Wesley had a personal encounter with God. And the world has never been the same.

Now Wesley’s heart was on fire – and the fire began to spread. Wesley went out and preached in the streets, in open fields, in front of factories, at the mouths of coal mines. Sometimes 20,000 people would gather around to hear Wesley’s message of New Birth – “you can be born again!”

One time he went to a church to preach and they locked him out. They said, “We don’t want to hear your evangelistic nonsense!” So he said, “Fine. My father is buried in this church’s cemetery, and his grave is my property, so I’ll go preach there.” And he stood on top of his father’s tomb, and he preached!

People all over England responded to Wesley’s preaching. Sinners became saints. Alcoholics quit drinking. Abusers quit beating their wives. Adulterers quit foolin’ around. Lives were changed as people all over England discovered a heartfelt, personal relationship with God.

But that’s not all. Wesley taught these people that they had to demonstrate their faith by helping others. So all over England, hungry people were fed, poor people were educated, homeless people were housed; rich people were challenged to share their resources and fight injustice. And while the French were having a bloody revolution, all of English society was changed by the faith and the good works of the People Called Methodist.

By the time John Wesley died in 1791, there were over 72,000 Methodists in Great Britain, and another 57,000 in America.

But Wesley was worried. He knew that numbers were not everything. He knew that FIRE could grow cold – and even go out.

Listen to what Wesley said about the Methodist movement late in his life:

“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.”

So what do you think? Have Wesley’s fears been realized? Are the Methodists of today “a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power?” Has the fire grown cold?

Is it going out?

Let me ask you another question, and this is one that only you can answer: How brightly does the fire of God's presence burn WITHIN YOU?

Maybe you have a growing relationship with God and you experience God's presence every day.

Maybe you felt your heart strangely warmed but it was years ago and now your fire has grown cold.

Maybe the fire does not burn in you at all, because you've never entered into a relationship with God. You can do that today. Today can be the day when your heart is strangely warmed. Today can be the day when you pray, "Lord come into my life, and give me 'an assurance that Christ has taken away my sins, even mine.'"

How brightly does the fire burn within you?

LET'S BOW OUR HEADS.