

*Easter Sermon Series: New Birth-Faith, Hope, Love*  
*Sermon Title: Faith*  
*John 3:1-8; Psalm 30; Acts 9:1-20*  
*Salem United Methodist Church; April 10, 2016*  
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With the Easter season happening during springtime, we witness new birth in nature through flowers and tree blossoms, animals giving birth, and eggs hatching. This is why rabbits and eggs are symbols of Easter. They represent new birth. But how does new birth connect us to the Resurrection of Jesus? In the next few weeks, we will explore the concept of New Birth through John Wesley's understanding of salvation.

Two of my granddaughters are at that age where they love to play board games. We have this one board game we have been playing for a couple of years called "Going to Grandma's House." On the game board there is this winding path that begins at the child's home and finishes at Grandma's house. Each player gets a car and a person to put in the car. There are cards to pull that tell you which color block to land on. Sometimes the card tells you to go ahead a couple of spaces, to go back a couple of spaces, go back to start which is always met with a few groans, or go straight to Grandma's house. This is the card every player wants to get. It means you won the game.

Board games that have these winding paths where there is a beginning and an end reminds me of John Wesley's view on salvation. He coined the phrase, "The Way of Salvation." For Wesley our salvation has a beginning and an end. It begins before we are baptized and ends when we pass from this world into eternal life. Sometimes we go back a few steps; sometimes we move forward a few, but God is always with us on our journey. Psalm 139 reminds us that God is with us before we were born. The Common English Bible states: "You knit me together while I was still in my mother's womb... Your eyes saw my embryo... your plans are incomprehensible to me." By the grace of God we were created and given new physical life. This grace of God follows us, leads us, directs us until we come to know who Jesus Christ is in our lives and have faith in him. John Wesley called this aspect of grace, preventing grace. That seems like an odd term, "preventing." Today this word means to keep something from happening. In the eighteenth century, though, "preventing" meant "coming before." The word originates from the Latin word, *preveniens*. So today we call this aspect of grace, Prevenient Grace-the grace that goes before us until we come to have faith in Jesus. I've witnessed God's Prevenient Grace in my life. God placed me in a home where there were people of faith who were great role models. Even when I strayed in college, God's Prevenient Grace lead me back to faith through a small congregation who accepted me as I was as a non-believer. Take a moment to reflect over your life to see how God's Prevenient Grace went before you until you came to faith.

We see God's Prevenient Grace in Saul's life. Before his Damascus road experience with the Risen Lord, Saul was a student of Gamaliel who was the head rabbi for the Jewish faith. Saul was being trained to become his successor. So Saul's religious education was the best there was. He knew the Hebrew Scriptures inside and out. Saul was also a Roman citizen, so he was at home in both the Jewish culture and the culture of the Roman Empire. Because of his bicultural status, Saul knew Hebrew, Greek, and possibly Aramaic. All of these gifts and talents were to assist him in what God had planned for him. These are just some of the ways God was working in Saul's life before he came to faith in Jesus. Before he does, however, Saul viewed Jesus as a threat to the Jewish faith. After the Crucifixion, Saul terrorized the followers of Jesus by pulling them out of their homes and imprisoning them. He approved of the killing of Stephen, one of the leaders of the early church, and he threatened to kill all the disciples to put an end to this movement. Saul was on his way to Damascus to find followers and imprison them when his life changed forever. He received a new birth.

We first encounter this term, "new birth," in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus, one of the Jewish leaders, comes to Jesus in the night. One could say that God's Prevenient Grace was going before him, leading him to Jesus. First, Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus has God given powers to perform miracles. But Jesus reveals that he is more than a miracle worker. He reveals that to be part of God's kingdom one must be born from above or born of water and the Spirit. Our baptism liturgy uses this language of John.

We are born of water and the Spirit. There is no natural means for this kind of birth. This New Birth comes only from God. John Wesley believed that this New Birth could happen at one's baptism, yes, even at infant baptism. But later in our lives God's Prevenient Grace may lead us back to this time in which we realize we need to receive this New Birth again, when we realize that we are not living a life that is honoring God. When we realize we are living a life of sin. If we think of the Way of Salvation as a board game, sin is the card that sends us back a few spaces while God's Grace is the card that moves us ahead a few spaces.

What is this sin that sets us back? Wesley defined sin as voluntarily and knowingly breaking God's law. God's Convincing Grace then brings us to acknowledge we are sinful, that we broke God's law. God's Convincing Grace brings us to a time of repentance, asking God to turn us around, so we can begin anew. Wesley called the forgiveness of our sins, Justifying Grace, or the grace that makes us right with God. When we use a writing program on our computers, there are options to justify the margin that is, to get the words to align to the margin, or be made right to the margin. God's grace of justification makes us right with God. God's grace forgives our sins. Through God's Justifying Grace we come to an understanding that Jesus died for the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus died for us. Paul wrote to the Romans that we are justified by faith (Romans 3:28). With this justification we receive a New Birth. This can happen once, or it can happen every day. Every time we confess our sins a new life is given to us.

So what is this New Birth? Saul's conversion on the way to Damascus is a prime example of a New Birth. Jesus took a terrorist, a murderer, and transformed him into a missionary whose purpose was to spread the Good News. Not all of us have this kind of dramatic New Birth. For some of us it is more gradual. It can take months, years, or a lifetime. John Wesley defined this New Birth as "that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it back into life: when he raises it from death of sin to the life of righteousness." It is a change in our souls by the Spirit when it is created anew in Jesus. The Apostle Paul spoke of this death and resurrection in his letter to the Romans. He speaks to our old self being crucified with Christ so our sin would be destroyed and we would no longer be enslaved to sin. And if we died with Christ, we are dead to sin and alive in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11). Thus we connect the Resurrection of Jesus with the New Birth. We receive it when we die to sin and are raised as new creations in him. Another way of thinking about New Birth is with the term, Regeneration. Animals like newts, salamanders, and star fish can regenerate missing body parts. When a body part is lost, they grow another one and have another chance at life. Our New Birth is a type of regeneration of our souls. By God's grace we regenerate a New Life.

How do we know that we have been reborn? John Wesley describes three marks of New Birth: Faith, Hope, and Love. Today we will look at Faith as a mark of New Birth. John Wesley believed when one received a New Birth one had faith or "a sure trust and confidence in God that through the merits of Christ [one's] sins are forgiven, and reconciled to the favor of God." When one has this kind of faith, Wesley believed one renounces one's selfish ways so we can live in Christ. This is the core of our salvation, but it is always a process or a work in progress. Just when we think we have such faith, God shows us yet another sin, another way in which we have broken God's law of love, another way in which we have been selfish and the process begins all over again. Wesley believed that this faith had the power over sin which means that we not only come to recognize the sin, but we have the faith with God's mercy, yet again, we are forgiven.

A fruit of faith is having a sense of peace. It is the peace that Jesus promised he would leave with us. It is the peace that passes all understanding, too. It is the serenity of the soul that we cannot create, but is only placed in us by the grace of God. According to Wesley a person who has faith as a mark of New Birth bears the fruit of peace by not being shaken by the storms of life, or pain, or sickness. In every state of life we can have this peace, assured that God's mercy always triumphs. God always wins. But faith is only the beginning of our New Birth. Yes, there is more which we will explore in the next two sermons.

**Reflection Questions:** Have you had that moment(s) when you realized God's mercy through Jesus Christ was meant for you and your sins? What does your New Birth look like? Have you faith? Have you peace?

**Resources:** *The Scripture Way of Salvation* by John Collins; "Salvation By Faith," "The New Birth," and "The Marks of New Birth," sermons by John Wesley; *Methodist Doctrine* by Ted Campbell; *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* by John Collins

