

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—24Mar19
I Cor 10
“Strangely Warmed”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

John Wesley was a clergyman who served in the Church of England. On the night of May 24, 1738, Wesley found himself worshipping in a London church that was not far from where our sister parish of St. Vedast is located today.

As John Wesley heard some words read from Scripture, he felt his heart “strangely warmed.” This new spiritual warmth inspired him to lead a movement to revive the Anglican Church. Revival was much needed; the Church of England at that time was a pretty lethargic institution. It needed some energy!

Wesley envisioned a church that would appeal to the heart as well as to the mind—a church where people could come to experience first-hand the love and joy of God.

This would require a special focus on *personal religion*. Wesley and his followers took their devotions seriously—both their private prayer and their community worship. Because of their rigorous, methodical spiritual habits, they came to be known as “Methodists.”

Eventually the Methodists split off from the Church of England to form their own denomination—though, happily, there is a movement these days that proposes that the two churches could reunite in the not-too-distant future.

John Wesley’s feeling of God’s presence that night in London gave him the determination that he needed to carry on with his movement. He made his own the comforting words that we heard in today’s First Lesson.

In that Lesson, St. Paul assures the Christians in the city of Corinth that “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

Talk about comforting words! What could be more encouraging than to realize that God is faithful to us, whatever happens. What could be more encouraging than to believe that no challenge that we might endure in life will be more than we can stand.

Yet it is the same idealism of Paul’s words that makes them hard for people to accept. Every one of us here today has felt at one time or another “tested.”

It’s even likely that we have been challenged to such an extent that we weren’t sure that we would be able to bear the trial that we faced. God’s promise was one thing; our frightening situation was something else!

Happily, John Wesley found no test too great for him. In the course of his revival efforts, Wesley endured many hardships. Traditionalists resented the less formal, more free-flowing worship that he proposed, and conservatives made the Methodist groups feel unwelcome in Anglican churches.

At one point, Wesley journeyed to America to try to establish new congregations in the state of Georgia--but this ambitious project was a failure, and no new churches survived.

Nevertheless, through it all, John Wesley was renewed again and again by his original vision. His heart had been touched by God. He realized that whatever his success in the eyes of the world, his sole responsibility to God was to be faithful.

In Christ's vivid image, Wesley "kept his head to the plow." He didn't "look back." He didn't question whether God would sustain him in his trials. He kept looking straight ahead and faced the test!

"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength." All the more reason for *us* to take God at his word and see what happens!

For example, instead of hoping that God will help us in the future, we can try to see where God is *already* helping us!

Now, I admit that I'm not very good at this, myself. I tend to get caught up in my problems. So it turns out that it is my worries that fill up my consciousness. I find that my problems make me so self-centered that I forget to even think about God!

And that's not good. If I'm not thinking about God, I remain stuck in my fears. I'm not going to be able to recognize that God is acting in my life.

For instance, one of my most frequent prayers is for *patience*. I can't seem to get enough of it! I'm always losing what patience I have!

Yet if I just stop for a minute and look for God's presence, I may find that what I am getting impatient about may not be all that important. Or, at least I will recognize that my inner agitation isn't making my life better!

The French mystic Simone Weil talked about, "Waiting for God." Waiting for God can also help me to remember times when God answered my prayers and gave me the inner strength to bear whatever was pressing upon me.

I can remember a particularly troubling time for me, a few months after I arrived at Incarnation in 1985. Out of the blue, I got a call that the Senior Warden, Thomas Foster, who had been in charge of my installation as rector had died suddenly of a heart attack.

Tom Foster's death was a shock. This tragic news came at a time when Incarnation really depended upon a few leaders, and our parish was dealing with a substantial budget deficit and massive building problems. (Every time it rained, water would stream into the church!)

But while I was initially shocked and saddened and discouraged by the bad news of our Senior Warden's death, I found myself able to forge ahead with our plans for renewal of our church. We established a building fund in Tom Foster's honor, and we were able to raise money to fix the roof and repaint the interior—and start new programs as well.

It was a hectic time! I don't remember whether or not my heart was strangely warmed. But I remember well the strength and direction that God gave me.

The time of crisis eventually passed. Three decades later, by God's grace, we are still finding the resources to fix up our church and start new programs.

God is indeed faithful. God is always faithful.

If sometimes we don't get what we pray for, we have to remember that God is still with us. We won't be tempted beyond what we can bear.

We may even find that in the midst of our problems, we will find our hearts "strangely warmed."

Amen.