

**Sunday July 6, 2025**  
**Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 9**

**Sermon:** “Go Wesley, Young Man!”

At my settlement charge, every year they held a Wesley service. If memory serves, it was the first Sunday of the year. My first year there, they told me about it.... after the first Sunday after Christmas. I wasn't sure what they meant when they told me I had to prepare a Wesley service for the next Sunday. I mean, they didn't specify which Wesley: Samuel Wesley, Anglican priest and father of John and Charles and 17 others; John Wesley, renowned preacher, author, founder of Methodism; Charles Wesley, renowned hymn writer and co-founder of Methodism; Samuel Wesley, son of Charles, English organist and composer; or perhaps even Samuel Sebastian Wesley, son of Samuel, grandson of Charles, English organist and composer. In today's service we focus on John, Charles, and Charles' grandson, Samuel Sebastian, oh, and Isaac Watts too.

John Wesley has been called “the single most influential Protestant leader of the English-speaking world since the Reformation.” Indeed, his life was used magnificently by God. In 53 years of ministry, he travelled 402,000 km on horseback or by carriage. He preached in excess of 40,000 sermons, sometimes as many as four in a single day. He also wrote or edited 400 books and tracts. John even wrote a book of home remedies. There is no way of knowing how many lives were changed for eternity due to his influence.

Yet he was not solely responsible for founding the Methodist movement. His brother, Charles, a fellow Anglican priest was actively involved in the founding of Methodism. The two brothers recognized the power of music, especially popular music, and its impact on the lives of people. Long before there were MP3 players or CDs or cassette tapes or 8 track tapes or vinyl records or even radios, music was a powerful force in the everyday lives of people. Before Muzak was pumped into every working environment, people used to hum, whistle, and sing popular songs to themselves as they worked. Writing hymns was a powerful way to teach Biblical ideas and lessons, and theology to the common person as the hymns stayed with the people long after the preachers left their community. The hymns were sung, outdoors, in all kinds of weather, to hundreds and even thousands of people, in the desperation of inner cities, in coal mining camps, in prisons, and in small farm communities. Charles has had

more than 6,500 hymns attributed to his record. Many, such as: Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus; Christ the Lord is Risen Today; Rejoice, the Lord is King; and Ye Servants of God and those which we will sing today are still widely sung. As I said, many of the hymns that Charles wrote were written to accompany familiar tunes; tunes of songs sung in the local taverns of his day. Can you imagine the copyright issues trying to write new lyrics for songs by Drake or Taylor Swift today?

“On Christmas Day 1738, Charles Wesley preached at St. Mary’s Church in Islington, and gave the wine at Holy Communion. Next day it was George Whitefield’s turn. ‘We had the sacrament this and the four following days – the whole week was a festival indeed; a joyful season, holy unto the Lord.’ Was that the first Christmas ever to be enriched by this hymn? In its original version, it was published a few months later. Whitefield was one of those who afterwards shaped it to its present form. So whenever we sing these words today, we are heirs to the work of England’s finest hymn-writer and her greatest preacher. The composer Mendelssohn belongs to the next century, but he did not live long enough to hear his famous music matched with this magnificent hymn.” (The Lion Book of Famous Hymns: Well Loved Hymns and Their Stories, compiled by Christopher Idle, Lion Publishing, Batavia Illinois, 1991)

## **48 Hark! the Herald Angels Sing**

While John was not a prolific hymn-writer like his brother, he did have something to say on the topic. He was concerned with the way hymns were sung. You will find a copy of his directions for singing on page 720 of your VU hymn books. Amongst other directions, he directs us to “Learn these tunes before any others...sing them as they are printed...sing all. See that you join with the congregation as frequently as you can....sing lustily and with a good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead, or half asleep...sing modestly. Do not bawl, that you may not destroy the harmony; but strive to unite your voices together....sing in time. Do not run before nor stay behind it...this drawling way naturally steals on all who are lazy....above all sing spiritually. Have an eye to God in every word you sing. Aim at pleasing him more than yourself, or any other creature.

Charles, the eighteenth and second last of his mother’s nineteen children, was born prematurely, sometime just prior to Christmas. He was small and frail and seemed more likely to die than to live, as nine of his siblings did before the end

of childhood. For two months he neither cried nor opened his eyes. Perhaps it is understandable then that Charles was never quite sure of the precise date of his birth. He was, however, quite sure of the date of his 'second birth.' On May 21, 1738 he was born again, that is to say, he responded to the love and grace of God. One year later, to commemorate the first anniversary of that day, he wrote this song.

### **326 O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing**

The Wesley's, as I have said, came from a very large family. Their father was also an Anglican priest, and with such a large family to support on a priest's income it is hardly surprising to learn that he served time in a debtor's prison. The Wesley's concern for the plight of the poor came naturally to them and led them to open soup kitchens, free medical dispensaries, homes for orphans and widows, and establish a school. They met people where they were, often marginalized and without hope.

Our next hymn was originally known as "A Morning Hymn" and was first published in 1740 when Methodism was still a new movement. It is rich in allusion to both the Old and New Testaments and offers hope to the hopeless. The tune that we sing this hymn to is called Ratisbon and it has been associated with the hymn since 1861. It was composed by J.G. Werner, who was an organist and director of music. He wrote it for his Choral Buch which dates back to 1815.

### **336 Christ Whose Glory Fills the Skies**

Court composer Henry Purcell and Poet Laureate John Dryden were a powerful combination in late seventeenth century England. When they got together to write a patriotic song – part of the opera King Arthur – it was an ideal partnership: Fairest Isle, all isles excelling, Seat of pleasure and of loves, Venus here will choose her dwelling and forsake her Cyprian groves... But for Charles Wesley, a generation later, this was not good enough. Venus, Jove and Cupid were getting more than enough honours paid to them, he felt, so he wrote these new words. Instead of pagan legends, Wesley's verses are full of the Bible; instead of glorifying the mythical deities of Mount Olympus, he wrote in praise of Jesus. Originally sung to Purcell's tune, they are now commonly sung to one of three tunes: Beecher composed by John Zundel in 1870; Blaenwern,

which is based on a Welsh melody and is the tune most commonly used in the UK and composed by W.P. Rowlands; and the tune in our hymn book, Roland H. Pritchard's Hyfrydol, which was composed in 1855.

### **333 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling**

As young men, both Charles and John spent a short time as missionaries in the American colony of Georgia. On board ship while crossing the Atlantic, and during their stay in Georgia, they met believers from the Moravian church with whom they identified spiritually, and John translated many of their hymns from German.

Back in the British Isles, the two brothers spent much time in Wales, encouraging a revival there that had begun with the lay evangelist Howell Harris earlier in the century. At the time of their death, both John and Charles remained Anglican priests. It wasn't until after their death that the Methodist Church formed, named for the Methodist movement founded by John, along with his brother Charles Wesley and George Whitefield. The movement focused on Bible study, methodical study of scripture and living a holy life.

Twenty two years after Charles' death his grandson, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, was born. Samuel S. was an organist and the greatest English composer of church music of his day. He composed the tune 'Aurelia', which means golden, as a setting for 'Jerusalem the Golden' in 1864. Henry Gauntlett condemned the tune as, and I quote, "secular twaddle." Let us sing that tune with lyrics by Samuel John Stone, The Church's One Foundation.