

“The Heart of Worship”

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2 Kings 22 & 23

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Will our church still be alive twenty years from now? In ancient Israel, when the temple in Jerusalem was in a state of sad neglect, the high priest made a miraculous discovery. Here is part of the story, from 2 Kings 22 & 23 of *Josiah of Judah*.

Josiah was eight years old when he became king. He ruled for thirty-one years in Jerusalem. He kept straight on the path blazed by his ancestor David, not one step to either left or right.

One day in the eighteenth year of his kingship, King Josiah sent the royal secretary Shaphan to The Temple of God with instructions: “Go to Hilkiah the high priest and have him count the money that has been brought to The Temple of God that the doormen have collected from the people. Have them turn it over to the foremen who are managing the work on The Temple of God so they can pay the workers who are repairing God’s Temple, all the carpenters, construction workers, and masons. Also, authorize them to buy the lumber and dressed stone for The Temple repairs.

The high priest Hilkiah reported to Shaphan the royal secretary, “I’ve just found the Book of God’s Revelation, instructing us in God’s ways. I found it in The Temple!” He gave it to Shaphan and he read it. Then Shaphan came back to the king and gave him an account of what had gone on: “Your servants have bagged up the money that has been collected for The Temple; they have given it to the foremen to pay The Temple workers.”

Then Shaphan the royal secretary told the king, “Hilkiah the priest gave me a book.” He proceeded to read it to the king.

When the king heard what was written in the book, God’s Revelation, he ripped his robes in dismay.

The king acted immediately, assembling all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. Then the king proceeded to The Temple of God. Then he read out publicly everything written in the Book of the Covenant that was found in The Temple of God. The king stood by the pillar and before God solemnly committed them all to the covenant: to follow God believingly and obediently; to follow his instructions, heart and soul, on what to believe and do; to put into practice the entire covenant, all that was written in the book. The people stood in affirmation; their commitment was unanimous.

This is a small story in the Old Testament. After the reigns of King David and King Solomon the Israelites have a series of bad kings, kings who don't follow God. But with King Josiah the page turns - - finally they have a good king. One of the signs that he is a good king is that he is maintaining the temple, making sure the repairs get done. Clearly, until this time, the temple had been badly neglected.

Jesus said that where your heart is, your treasure will be also. You get the sense that neither their heart nor their treasure had been with the temple for quite some time. And remember that in those days this was not simply keeping up a nice church building – the temple was where the presence of God was housed. So, there is a sense that it is not just a church building they have neglected, but God as well ... and their commitment and devotion to their faith.

While they are doing these renovations, while they are finally tending to something that matters, they make an amazing discovery. Renovations and cleaning up can sometimes have that effect. Have you ever found something you'd forgotten about when you started cleaning up the basement or cleaning out the house? I remember when I was serving in my first congregation in Claresholm, Alberta, we were cleaning things up. We opened an old trunk and found it was full of old hymn books. When we removed the hymn books, we discovered an inscription. The trunk had originally belonged to John Wesley — and had been housed at his home in Epworth, England! Wesley is the famous founder of Methodism. In Canada the Methodists all joined the Union in 1925 to become the United Church of Canada, and Wall Street is one of the many churches across the country that was originally Methodist.

Now back in Claresholm, (which had also been a Methodist church), we had no clue if this claim was true. But the more we looked into it, the more it seemed like it really could be true. The trunk was the right age, and it contained a little history of how it had moved from England and into the United States and then up to Alberta. It had been donated by a then deceased member of the congregation sometime before. So there was a reasonable chance that this piece of furniture had once belonged to John Wesley, and here it was in a dusty corner of the church filled with old hymn books! We relocated it to a prominent position in the sanctuary.

In King Josiah's time while they are renovating and cleaning out the Temple, they also find something of significance. They find the book of the law – the Bible – or at least the first books of what we know of as the Bible.

When it is discovered, it is brought to the king. The king reads it and instantly recognizes what it is. He realizes how sacred it is and he is shaken that they have not been following what is inside. He rips his robes, which was a public sign of repentance. Josiah then consults Hulda the prophetess and she confirms in classic Old Testament style that it is true — this is the book of God's Revelation, and that they will experience God's judgement and wrath because they have not been following the law.

I find it amazing that over the years they somehow lost what was at the heart of their worship. How do you do that? I guess they got distracted by other things — but somehow worshiping God was no longer at the center of what they were doing.

This past week a report was presented to the heads of the Anglican Church of Canada on how the Anglican church membership is in significant decline. Rev. Neil Elliot reported:

"We've got simple projections from our data that suggest that there will be no members, attenders or givers in the Anglican Church of Canada by approximately 2040."

That's 20 years from now! If 2040 feels like a long time from now — it's not. Do you remember celebrating New Year's on Y2K wondering if all the computer systems were going to shut down? That was 20 years ago. 20 years is just not very long.

Before you breathe a sigh of relief that you are in the United Church and not the Anglican Church, his report touched on how other churches in Canada are doing, and he said that the United Church of Canada also showed *"2040 as a zero-member date"*. Just in time for my retirement! You can't take the statistics exactly at face value because just by looking around you see people of faith who have more than 20 years left to live. I don't see myself or my kids giving up on faith and church in 20 years' time. But clearly the church will be radically, radically different, and there may not be a denomination at all.

This is not an easy country for Christians. In fact, that same Anglican report indicated that the Anglican church in Canada is declining at the fastest rate of any other country in the world-wide Anglican community. We can't compare our church because the United Church of Canada only exists in Canada. But this denomination that once boasted being the largest protestant church in the country is now a shadow of its former self.

There are so many reasons for decline. Much of it has to do with a changing society and culture around us. But it seems to me that part of the reason the Anglican church and the United church and many other mainline churches are in the same position is that while we have maintained and

created impressive institutions and programs, we have perhaps lost sight of the heart of it — a transforming relationship with Jesus. We've lost some of the basics of prayer and hearing God through reading the scripture and praising and connecting to God through music and reaching out to people beyond ourselves.

When king Josiah realizes what they had lost and what they had found, he has the scripture read out publicly with everyone gathered around. And the scripture says that they committed to going back to practice what was written in the book. King Josiah then puts into place a number of reforms and he makes things right again – which makes a huge change — until with later kings and later generations the people forget again.

Over the centuries there are seasons of building and expanding, and then often seasons of distraction and forgetfulness. Sometimes they are followed by seasons of renovation and reform and remembering. I believe we are in a season of renovation and potential reform. We have the potential, like king Josiah, to rend our clothing and say “I'm sorry Lord for the thing we've made it – for it's all about you ... It's all about you.”

There have been times of reform all through the history of Christianity and even before Christianity as you see with Josiah. I think of John Wesley who began the Methodist Church. Actually, he had no desire to form a new church; he wanted to reform and renew his own Church of England, but they ended up kicking him out of the church and he had no choice but to start something new.

At a time when the Church of England (the Anglican Church) valued academics, formality and decorum; John Wesley went back to basics. When he formed a small group at his Oxford University to study the scripture and pray and preach, others mocked the godly group and called them 'methodists'. They were also reaching out to people with the gospel who would never walk inside a church. Instead of waiting for people to come in, they began preaching about the gospel on street corners. This didn't go over well back at the university. It just wasn't how things were done! You can get a sense of the general attitude at Oxford toward the Methodists from this conversation between Dr. Samuel Johnson (defending the actions of expelling the Methodists from the school) to James Boswell: Johnson says to Boswell:

“Sir, the expulsion of six students from the University of Oxford, who were Methodists and would not desist from publicly praying and exhorting, was extremely just and proper. What have they to do at an University who are not willing to be taught, but will presume to teach? Where is religion to

be learnt, but at a University?” Boswell replies “But was it not hard, Sir, to expel them, for I am told they were good beings”. Johnson answers “I believe they might be good beings, but they were not fit to be in the University of Oxford. A cow is a very good animal in a field, but we turn her out of a garden.”

John and his brother Charles Wesley had a firm foundation in the faith from their parents, but simply having an educated faith and doing church the way it was taught at school did not seem to be enough. Both John and Charles found their faith renewed – their faith went from being in their heads to being in their hearts. How did that happen? They were influenced and affected by the faith of people from other denominations. When the brothers set sail for the United States there was a group of Moravians on board. This was a group of German Pietists and they had a great influence on John and Charles.

When a potentially deadly sea squall rose up, the Moravians remained totally calm. They spent more time with Moravians seeking that kind of depth of assurance in their faith. They received it a few years later back in England just a few days apart. Charles experienced it first on May 21, 1738 when he powerfully experienced Christ’s forgiving presence. *“I felt a strange palpitation of heart”* was how he described it. Three days later John experienced his own much more famous assurance of his faith. Just following a small religious society meeting in Aldersgate Street, John said: *“I felt my heart strangely warmed”*. Before this experience their faith had been more of a head faith, but now it had taken over their hearts. Many people, particularly people from the working class and the poor, were being won over as John preached the gospel. John and Charles were faced with the dilemma of how to help these people to continue to grow in their faith and not slide back into their old life. John decided to divide a Methodist society, which was all the Methodists in an area, into groups or classes of 12 that met together with the leader. The leader would always begin the meeting by asking the people in his group *“How is it with your soul?”* I love that question.

They also spent time in prayer, Bible study and singing. I believe it was partly because of his Methods and organization, but even more because John and Charles went back to the root of their faith and they let it grow in their hearts — that a new movement began.

What is at the heart of worship for us? Jesus, as revealed in scripture. Connecting and coming together through prayer, music and the study of the scripture. And tuning in to how the Holy Spirit is calling us to

make a difference. My own personal faith has been renewed and revived by rediscovering some of the basics of a daily devotion – a daily time of reading the Bible and connecting to God through prayer and discovering that I can listen to God and have a two-way conversation.

This is a challenging time and place to be a Christian ... but I'm not looking to retrain to become something else. I have hope for the Church. I have hope for this church. My hope is not just about putting on a 'can-do' attitude. My hope is found in rediscovering the heart of faith.

I see other clergy whose faith is strong and who are doing wonderful ministry. People like Rev. Lawrence Nyarko; our anniversary speaker a couple of weeks ago, give me hope. He could be leading a huge church in his home country of Ghana, but he was called to come to Canada to sow seeds on difficult soil.

What is the future of the United Church? I can't tell you that. I suspect at some point denominations won't matter anymore. It is quite possibly true that in 20 years there may not be a United Church, but there will most definitely be a Christian Church. There will always be followers of Jesus.

What will matter is a group of people who are willing to live differently, who are willing to let Jesus into their heart and be so changed that they can't help but be that change in the community and in the world.

So our church needs renovating, renewing and reforming – the only question is: are we open to that?

And what about your life? Are there cobwebs that need cleaning out? Is there a faith that needs to be renewed? I pray you will commit to finding again those ancient paths – going back to the old to find a new way of life in Jesus.

We are a forgetful people. The good news is God never forgets us. The good news is that when we strip away all that does not matter, we can find the heart of worship and the heart of our faith.

Thanks be to God.