



# Wesleyan Roots

What Makes United Methodism Distinct

PARTICIPANT HANDOUT



Unit 3: The Way of Christ

## Session 12: God is Not Finished Yet—Living and Leading with Hope in Uncertain Times

### The Wesleyan Root of Hope

Throughout Christian history, followers of Jesus Christ have needed the power of the Holy Spirit to give them hope and to spur them forward during all kinds of difficulties. Christians have found themselves, both individually and collectively, facing a plethora of painful, threatening challenges because of their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus warned that tough times were coming. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34b). “Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22). And “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). Jesus was not wrong; indeed, it is easy to understand how a person’s Christian identity can be threatened in the face of difficulties: hatred, poverty, illness, war, death, etc. And yet it is our calling as Christians to be people of hope.

**Hope** is a practical and theological concept in all Christian traditions – a feeling of trust which leads to an optimistic belief that God is real and present in our lives. Hope assures us that no matter what, God is with us, and we are not alone. This forward-looking orientation provides opportunity and energy to live into our relationship with God more fully. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christ’s intentional followers participate in a life that is different from that of other people. Christians have access to resources that provide guidance, strength, power, and comfort. Specifically, I am talking about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, which works like prevenient grace. It is around us even when we are not aware. It justifies us and empowers us to make things right with God and one another. The Holy Spirit also offers us peace and joy which leads to hope.

### The Reign of God

Wesleyans share with other Christians the hope embedded in the present and coming reign of God. Examining a broad

sweep of the Judeo-Christian tradition, United Methodists understand the reign of God as being God’s active presence in and involvement with all parts of creation. Note that, because of linguistic tradition in Judaism and traditions surrounding it, “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” are almost synonymous in the New Testament, and we tend to use “reign of God,” as used in our Book of Discipline.<sup>1</sup>

We can identify several themes with the concept of the **reign of God**. For example, the reign of God fulfills promises from the Old Testament (i.e., Luke 4:16–30). The reign of God typically points to transformation (i.e., Matt. 13:31–33). It involves turning the rules of our world “upside down” as in Matt. 20:16, where “...the last will be first, and the first will be last.” The reign of God breaks down barriers that were previously in place, including people on the margins of society (John 4:22–24). It especially identifies God’s rule as dynamic rather than static, as God’s presence works in the midst of humanity to bring about God’s will, or preferred future, “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

### The Reign of God as Past, Present, and Future Reality

One major distinction of Wesleyan Christianity compared to some other Christian traditions has to do with the when of the reign of God more than the what. While some Christian brothers and sisters focus on the reign of God being primarily a future reality, United Methodists tend to understand the reign of God as being already present with us, not yet fully complete, and still to come in all of its fullness.

Living with hope in our present age as Wesleyan Christians begins with remembering God’s faithfulness in the past as we read the Bible, as we learn about the history of God’s people, as we learn about the history of our local congregation, as we learn about the history of our family, and as we remember the stories of our own lives. Both

<sup>1</sup> Chilton, Bruce. “Kingdom of God, Kingdom of Heaven” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Volume 3. Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob et. al. eds. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008. Pp. 512-523.

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it has been expressed in the past puts us on a more secure footing for our present and our future, for our God is trustworthy.

Clearly, the Wesleyan tradition recognizes, honors, and teaches the work God has done in creation and among the created order throughout history, not only after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. God was just as sovereign when the psalmist penned Psalm 96 as when John of Patmos penned Revelation 21:1-7. There are Christian traditions that do not teach much about God's reign prior to Jesus; however, Wesleyans recognize the reign of God as being a reality in the past, even as it is in the present and future. God's presence in our midst is the source of our hope.

Perhaps the dimension in which Wesleyans are most distinct is our understanding of God's reign being a present reality. Believers can trust that God has worked and is continuing to work in the world. Some people examine the state of the world around us and use this as a reason not to acknowledge God. They ask, "How can God even exist with the world being as it currently is?" But remember the discussion from Session 4 on determinism and free will? It is not so much that God caused the deterioration of our reality, but rather that God stands ready to redeem the mess we humans have managed to make in the world around us. Furthermore, God's reign in the present calls us to live out our faith in real and meaningful ways.

When we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying for God to be at work here in this life, and I believe we are called to participate in that present state of the reign of God.

When we love our neighbor, welcome the stranger, comfort those in pain, feed the hungry, stand for justice, share the story of Jesus, and try to make this world a better place, we are blessed to see glimpses of God's reign. We believe God ruled all creation from the very beginning, and that the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ ushered in a new era of God's reign. As such, the Church as the body of Christ is charged with living into a new reality in which God's reign is treated as the reality it is. We are not to sit around waiting until we get to heaven; there is plenty to do right here, right now.

When Christians strive to live in peace and harmony, we are foreshadowing the peace and harmony to which we look forward at the end of the age. When Christians work

to influence public policy that assists the poor, the sick, and people marginalized for any reason, we are living into a heavenly reality in which no one is poor, no one is sick, and no one is excluded. When an individual Christian sits with a grieving person in the name of Jesus Christ, he or she embodies Revelation 21:4, in which "God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

### **In short, God is not finished yet!**

While we are distinct in our Wesleyan belief in the present reality of God's reign, we also find hope in the future reality that is still to come. We see God's kingdom in all its glory called the "fairer worlds on high" in the beloved spiritual "Marching to Zion."<sup>2</sup> This future state is a necessary complement and continuation of the present reality of God's reign. The prospect of God's future reign gives us hope and motivation to continue our good work today, looking forward to an even better tomorrow.

Although it does not comprise our full understanding of the reign of God, the future reality of God's kingdom also brings peace and hope as we consider the realities of our mortality. The Book of Discipline reminds us that we "rejoice in the promise of everlasting life that overcomes death and the forces of evil," and Jesus told his followers "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). We repeat these words at funerals and memorials in our Service of Death and Resurrection, serving as a reminder of the promise of eternal life and our assurance of hope to come.

### **Leading with Hope**

We are all called to be hope-filled leaders in our families, our places of work, our places of study, our communities, or our local congregations. It is humbling to realize that others may watch you to learn what it means to be a Christian and a United Methodist. Some people may determine whether Christianity in general, or United Methodism in particular, is something they want to explore based upon how you lead. Rather than being overwhelmed by others looking to us in this way, we can trust our relationship with God through Jesus Christ and lean heavily on grace. "Since grace is God's presence and power preceding our efforts, going before us and with us, Christian leadership is courageous and filled with hope."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Watts, Isaac and Robert Lowry. "Marching to Zion." *The United Methodist Hymnal*, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, 733.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Carder and Lacey C. Warner. *Grace to Lead: Practicing Leadership in the Wesleyan Tradition (Revised Edition)*. Nashville: General Board of Higher Education and Ministry, 2016. p. xvi.

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This type of courageous, hope-filled leadership involves opening our hearts and minds to new ideas, stretching our concept of “neighbor,” and being willing to stand up and speak out when necessary so that the reign of God can come more closely to fruition. At times this means sharing our own story of faith with others. In my experience, people develop relationships with Jesus Christ individually, one person at a time. Our willingness to humbly and gently talk about our relationship with Jesus Christ in appropriate times and places makes opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move not only in our lives but in the lives of others. At other times, we are called by God to the critical work of peace and justice, standing up and speaking out for those who lack a voice in our society. Harold Recinos writes, “The messianic age is with us when we set out to overcome a divided world with love and justice, especially struggling primarily for all those persons who hold onto hope in the midst of despair in a world that takes it away. By walking the Samaritan road and acting compassionately in the world we become signs of the approaching reign of God... The church is good news when it crosses every boundary to become a neighbor to the battered, excluded, and set aside. The church fulfills the promise of God by acting mercifully in the world, defending human rights, and seeking peace and justice for those who suffer at the hands of unjust others.”<sup>4</sup>

### Tracing our United Methodist Identity

As we conclude this last session of Wesleyan Roots, I would like to briefly trace the path we have undertaken to arrive at this point. In Unit 1, we covered the Wesleyan roots of grace, prevenient grace, baptism, and free will, all to put language to what God is doing in our lives as God's grace goes before us. Unit 2 focused on the nature of God as we examined the Wesleyan roots of scripture, salvation, justification, sanctification, Christian perfection, diversity, and the open table of Holy Communion providing access to the real presence of Christ. Unit 3 has described what it means to follow the way of Christ through the Wesleyan roots of social holiness, spiritual practices, learning together and individually, and living into the hope of the reign of God.

### Where Will You Go from Here?

Thank you for accompanying me through my interpretation of some of the most important Wesleyan roots. There are many other aspects to the United Methodist understanding of faith, and if these have captured your imagination, it is my hope that you will continue your study of Wesleyan Christianity. Check the Resource Guide for a sample of that which is available to you.

The most important part of this entire journey is the concept of grace: how God loved you from before your birth, how God loves you now, and how God will continue to love you throughout eternity. Through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are offered a life that is better than it would ever have been otherwise. We only need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit to participate in the way of salvation.

On behalf of the North Texas Conference of the United Methodist Church, Bishop Mike McKee, and the Center for Leadership Development, I extend to you the love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Marsha Engle Middleton*

<sup>4</sup> Recinos, Harold J. “In a Divided World, Methodism Matters” found in Abraham, William J. and James E. Kirby, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2009.

### United Methodist Identity Points:

- Christians can have hope, even in hard times, through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.
  - Christian hope is deeply connected to the concept of the kingdom, or reign, of God. United Methodists focus not only on the future fulfillment of God's reign, but also on the partial fulfillment of God's reign right now. We are encouraged to participate in making God's reign a reality now by sharing our story of faith with others, by acts of mercy and piety, and by working to bring about peace and justice in our world.
  - Because we remember God's faithfulness in the past and can recognize God's work in our present, we can also face the future with hope knowing God will continue to be present with us and with those we love.
  - We are all called to leadership in some venue, and our faith can impact how we lead others. Most people come to faith in Jesus Christ one person at a time, so it is important for Christians to be able and willing to share the story of their own faith with others, as well as to do the work of social holiness in the world.
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### Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

- Think of a time in your life when you were in need of hope. How did God show up in your situation?
  - Where in the Wesleyan roots do you find the most hope? What is one way you can share this hope with others?
  - Have you thought through your own story of faith? Take an opportunity to think about and plan a thirty-second "elevator speech" in which you describe it to another. Do you believe God will provide you an opportunity to use it in real life? Do you think you have the courage to put it to use?
  - Out of all the Wesleyan roots named in this study, which one is most important to your own life of faith? Which ones were surprising? Name new things you learned about the United Methodist approach to Christianity. If anything was confusing, please reach out to a pastor or friend who is familiar with the United Methodist theological tradition. Remember that we are a body that is open to asking questions, talking things over with others, and thinking through our faith.
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