

Sermon Text for January 4, 2015

by

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Jeremiah 31:31-34, I Peter 1:22-25

“Covenant Renewal Service”

We are in 2015. Hard to believe, isn't it? Every New Year when the pages on the calendar is turned and we go not only from a new month to a New Year we inevitably look past over the year that was. The New Year marks our attempts at making resolutions that we know inevitably over time will fail. It is a simple reflection of any attempts we make to determine for ourselves to make ourselves, to determine for ourselves that we can change the course and the future of our life. It is a simple reflection of our misguided notion that we are ultimately in charge of our lives.

My father-in-law bought me a book this Christmas, he never buys me books, he always buys me a nice shirt and tie. That's why you're stuck with this one from last year, he didn't get me one this year, he bought me a book. It's called unbroken. The entire book until the last chapters is a testament to a single human's ability to persevere and make it through the most inhumane conditions. If you don't make it to the last chapters you leave the book thinking we are amazing creatures, able to do anything on our own if we just set out mind to it. We can be unbroken on our own no matter how hard people try to tear us down. The focus on that statement is on whom? Us. If we want to make a new life for ourselves we just have to try hard enough and we can.

But when this man who was unbroken comes home from the war, he breaks. He realizes that he can't do it on his own. He slips into alcoholism, PTSD, his wife leaves him, he's broke. But then one day he meets Jesus. Through the words of Billie Graham he realizes he has to live for something bigger than himself, because on his own he is doomed to a very sad death, no matter what he was able to do. From one day to the next because Jesus was at the heart of his transformation, and not his own will power, he stopped drinking, he had no more nightmares that were caused by the atrocities that he suffered in the war, and he dedicated his life away from what was good for him and toward what was good for God, his Creator, his Savior Jesus Christ.

As we face this New Years, I don't want you to make any resolutions. I want you to look carefully at the words that we read this morning in our Scriptures. Jeremiah tells us to make a

covenant with God like we have never made before. It is not based upon what we are able to do, but what God has already done for us. Vs. 34 tells us that God has forgiven our sin already. You don't have to try to do something to make up for your sins, you can't do enough anyway. God has taken them and has already forgiven them and has written his love and his presence and his law on your heart. Stop trying to make up for your inadequacies. Jesus is adequate enough for us to live for him.

Likewise in I Peter we read the author focus on what we need to focus on, which is what Jesus did for us. Are we out of control, Jesus died and suffered on the cross to give us the control that we need. We can't reclaim that control alone. Are we finding ourselves isolated and alone? Jesus allow us to start over, be born anew, not because we choose to or decide to, but because Jesus made sure of that. Are we lost in our sin, unable to get ourselves out of the spiral that seems to have taken over our time and our actions? I Peter tells us that our flesh is like grass. Not one of us can prevent death from claiming our flesh. But Jesus has prevented death from claiming our lives, through Christ we can renew our covenant today and stand before him as new creatures not because of who we are, but because of who Jesus is.

In 1775 John Wesley used this format for one of his services and credit goes to him for the content of this service. He in turn got the idea from a Puritan Richard Alleine 100 years earlier. Each year this service would be done during a New Year's Eve watchnight service. Wesley, who began the Methodist movement, found this service rich and meaningful as he expressed in his journal "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted.", and "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing". Again in his diary he remarks "It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences. I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backsliding." As you can see this can be a powerful service if you let it be.

If you would take out the booklet which is in your bulletin. Notice that the heart of this service is found in the Covenant Prayer. This prayer requires persons to commit themselves to God. This covenant is serious and we must take it seriously. At the beginning of the prayer I will pause for a few moments to allow people to kneel if they so desire, or to bow your head in respect to the Almighty God and to the step which we are about to take together in this prayer. We will be held responsible for that in which we take part, good or bad. Approach this service

with reverence, seriousness, and an open heart to God.

You will notice that each bulleting contains a copy of the covenant service. On the last page of the service you will find a space where you can put your signature and the date. I want to encourage all of you to read through, pray through this service. If you feel that you are able to recommit or commit yourselves for the first time to the promises which are written in these pages then sign it, mark the date, and please call me or let me know that you have done that so that I can pray for you and so that we can talk about what is involved in this recommitment, or this commitment.

It is now the year 2015, we will be taking together the first Lord's Supper together of the New Year. But even more importantly today in this service you will be given an opportunity to embrace the new life that Jesus has chosen for you. How fitting it is that we will be able to recommit our lives to Christ and then together take part in the sign of that new commitment in the Covenant of the Lord's Supper. We will also have represented an opportunity for you to remember your baptismal covenant by taking a blue bead from the fountain and take it home as a reminder of the covenant that you made today.

Let us now renew our promises before Almighty God.

Covenant Renewal Liturgy

PROCLAMATION

Brothers and sisters in Christ,
the Christian life is redeemed from sin and consecrated to God. Through baptism, we have entered this life

and have been admitted into the new covenant
of which Jesus Christ is the Mediator.

He sealed it with his own blood, that it might last for ever.

On the one side, God promises to give us new life in Christ,
the Source and Perfecter of our faith.

On the other side, we are pledged

to live no more for ourselves but only for Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us.

From time to time we renew our covenant with God,

especially when we reaffirm the Baptismal Covenant and gather at the Lord's table.

Today, however, we meet, as the generations before us have met, to renew the covenant that binds us to God.

Let us make the covenant of God our own.

INVITATION

Commit yourselves to Christ as his servants.

Give yourselves to him, that you may belong to him.
Christ has many services to be done.
Some are more easy and honorable,
 others are more difficult and disgraceful.
Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,
 others are contrary to both.
In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.
But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ
 except by denying ourselves.
It is necessary, therefore,
 that we consider what it means to be a servant of Christ.
Let us, therefore, go to Christ and pray:

**Let me be your servant, under your command.
I will no longer be my own.
I will give myself to your will in all things.**

Be satisfied that Christ shall give you your place and work.

**Lord, make me what you will.
I put myself fully into your hands:
 put me to doing, put me to suffering,
 let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,
 let me be full, let me be empty,
 let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and with a willing heart
 give it all to your pleasure and disposal.**

Christ will be the Savior of none but his servants.
He is the source of all salvation to those who obey.
Christ will have no servants except by consent;
Christ will not accept anything except full consent
 to all that he requires.
Christ will be all in all, or he will be nothing.

Confirm this by a holy covenant.

To make this covenant a reality in your life, listen to these admonitions:
First, set apart some time, more than once,
 to be spent alone before the Lord;
in seeking earnestly God's special assistance
 and gracious acceptance of you;
in carefully thinking through all the conditions of the covenant;
in searching your hearts
whether you have already freely given your life to Christ.
Consider what your sins are.

Consider the laws of Christ, how holy, strict, and spiritual they are, and whether you, after having carefully considered them,
are willing to choose them all.

Be sure you are clear in these matters, see that you do not lie to God.

Second, be serious and in a spirit of holy awe and reverence.

Third, claim God's covenant,
rely upon God's promise of giving and grace and strength,
so you can keep your promise.

Trust not your own strength and power.

Fourth, resolve to be faithful.

You have given to the Lord your hearts,
you have opened your mouths to the Lord,
and you have dedicated yourself to God.

With God's power, never go back.

And last, be then prepared to renew your covenant with the Lord. Fall down on your knees, lift your hands toward heaven,
open your hearts to the Lord, as we pray:

COVENANT PRAYER

(The people may kneel or bow if they so choose)

**O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
see me as I fall down before you.**

**Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will,
for you have promised mercy to me
if I turn to you with my whole heart.**

God requires that you shall put away all your idols.

**I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all,
covenanting with you that no known sin shall be allowed in my life.**

Against your will, I have turned my love toward the world.

In your power

**I will watch all temptations that will lead me away from you. For my own
righteousness is riddled with sin,
unable to stand before you.**

Through Christ, God has offered to be your God again
if you would let him.

Before all heaven and earth,

**I here acknowledge you as my Lord and God.
I take you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for my portion,**

and vow to give up myself, body and soul, as your servant, to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

God has given the Lord Jesus Christ
as the only way and means to coming to God.

**Jesus, I do here on bended knees accept Christ
as the only new and living Way,
and sincerely join myself in a covenant with him.**

**O blessed Jesus, I come to you,
hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked,
unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants.**

**I do here, with all my power, accept you as my Lord and Head. I renounce my own worthiness,
and vow that you are the Lord, my righteousness.**

I renounce my own wisdom, and take you for my only guide.

I renounce my own will, and take your will as my law.

Christ has told you that you must suffer with him.

**I do here covenant with you, O Christ,
to take my lot with you as it may fall.**

**Through your grace I promise
that neither life nor death shall part me from you.**

God has given holy laws as a rule of your life.

I do here willingly put my neck under your yoke, to carry your burden. All your laws are holy, just, and good.

**I therefore take them as the rule for my words, thoughts, and actions,
promising that I will strive
to order my whole life according to your direction,
and not allow myself to neglect anything I know to be my duty.**

The Almighty God searches and knows your heart.

**O God, you know that I make this covenant with you today
without guile or reservation.**

If any falsehood should be in it, guide me and help me to set it aright.

And now, glory be to you, O God the Father,

Whom I from this day forward shall look upon as my God and Father.

Glory be to you, O God the Son,

who have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood, and now is my Savior and Redeemer.

Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit,

who by your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God.

O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have now become my Covenant Friend.

And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant.

So be it.

And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

Signature: _____

Date: