

# Sermon Text for January 3, 2016

*By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema*

Deuteronomy 31:9-13, John 15:1-8  
*“Covenant Renewal Service”*

I've noticed that I have put before you a number of challenges that I'm encouraging you to face especially in this New Year. I have put before you the 90 day challenge, which I'm so pleased so many of you are following and taking advantage of that great opportunity. It is January and I challenged you to give 10% for the month of January to try to see how God is truly faithful to you. Again, it is not a fundraiser for the church, but rather an opportunity to see how Scripture is able to come true and how God keeps His promises to you in your life as an individual.

We have some other challenges that are going to be coming up over these next few weeks. Mayor Terrill Hill will be preaching on January 17 and sharing with us on the Saturday evening before. I think it is going to be an opportunity for many of us to be pushed out of our comfort zones as he addresses issues that we don't necessarily have to face here in sleepy little Strasburg. Unless we wander into the city we don't really have to face the issues of racism that the rest of the country is wrestling with. We will face it head on that week.

Finally, on February 7, not 6 as some of you have pointed out to me, Rev. Steve Clark will be returning and will be leading us in worship and in communion. Steve and Jennie who were my predecessors 8 years ago and represent the second longest pastoral tenure in the history of the church. But we all know that there are some very, very strong feelings about their time here, and as an outsider to those 12 years I thought it was time that we asked him to come back.

I am throwing a lot of challenges at you to begin this year, but the new year is all about starting over and starting on the right foot and being in a right relationship with Jesus. There is nothing that we can do to make our relationship right with Jesus, but the joy of our faith is that Jesus has already done it all, all we have to do is live into it, is abide in him. Let's read our second Scripture.

What is the word that is repeated more than any other word in this Scripture? Abide, that's right, 11 times in 7 verses we find this word repeated. What is Jesus telling us? He is telling us that we have to abide, live, dwell with him. The scene of this Scripture is Jesus around the table of the last supper with his disciples. This is his last discourse. He chooses to insist on this word abide. In the Greek it means literally to remain. Remain in me, don't abandon me, I will go, but I'll be back, stay with me.

When we abide in our Savior, we don't forget what he is able to do with us. When we face the challenges that are put before us we grow and then are able to bear more fruit. This is what Jesus tells his disciples using the imagery of the vine and the branches. We are disciple makers, we are to bear much fruit. Bearing of fruit requires at times that we be pruned, that we be cleansed, that we realize that we are not able to do anything apart from the vine. The branches are not able to grow fruit without the vine, the life giving foundation.

Until we are able to see our need to be pruned, our need to face up to those times in our lives when we did not reflect Christ to those around us as individuals, unless we are able to face our past sins as a congregation, those times that we were more concerned about our own well being and our interests as opposed to the interests of God's community and His kingdom, until we face up to those challenges then they will constantly bear bad fruit.

Like any fruit, you can have branches and trees that bear the fruit it is supposed to, but it is bitter. You can have a plum tree like we do, but the fruit is not edible. The same is true with grapes. The more pruning that takes place the better the fruit. The same is true for us as individuals as well as us for a church. The more we recognize the sour fruit that we have produced, then the less we will be to make those same mistakes. Jesus tells us two things that we do well not to forget: vs. 5: Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. And then again vs. 7: If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

Deuteronomy 31 tells us that we have to remind ourselves of that, and remind our children of that as well. They did it every 7 years, we do it every year this first Sunday of the New Year. 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 2016, 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.