

# Sermon Text for January 7, 2018

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II Kings 23:1-3, John 15:1-8

## *Covenant Renewal Service*

We find ourselves once again on the first Sunday of a new year when we find ourselves face to face with the covenant renewal service. We gather ourselves like people have gathered for centuries now to renew their vows and to reaffirm a covenant that we have with our Savior Jesus Christ. If this is your first Sunday here and you do not know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, it may seem a bit out of place for you. Nobody is forced to make a vow with Jesus, although against our will and without any help from us he died on the cross and was raised again so that we could have salvation. We did not choose Jesus, he chose us. But today we gather to recognize that this past year we have not always chosen him, but He has remained faithful. Our first Scripture for today point to a presence of God that is overwhelming that requires that it be recognized publicly and that reminds us to renew our vows periodically before the Lord. We will do that today. Our second Scripture reminds us that we are part of a much larger body that encompasses more than what you see today. It encompasses a body of Christ that stretches across this country and across the globe. This body is part of those branches that are growing from the true vine Jesus Christ. Today we are reminded to abide in him and to remind ourselves of how important it is to remain on the vine.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

Before we go forward with our covenant renewal service I want to briefly look at these two Scriptures as a backdrop to what we will be doing together. We will together as a congregation do something very similar to what was done in II Kings 23:1-3. We read in chapter 22 that king Josiah took over the throne when he was 8 years old. He was a good king. 18 years into his reign, so he would have been 26, one of his secretaries brought him a book that had been found at the temple and it was the book of the law, it was the Bible. Now, keep in mind people had forgotten and had not heard the Scripture read in generations. As a result of hearing the words of Scripture read to him he tore his clothes because he recognized that neither he nor the people were doing God's will. Their ancestors had let them down by not ensuring that this Word of the Lord would be passed down from generation to generation.

When the king rediscovered the Law, the Scripture, he gathered all the people of the land. In front of all the people of the land the king made a covenant, made a promise to the Lord “to follow the Lord, keeping his commandments, his decrees, and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. All the people joined him in the covenant.” This is what we are doing today. We are joining King Josiah, we are joining the generations of those who have gone before us and making a covenant before the Lord that we will follow his commandments.

In the New Testament we heard the words of Jesus as he speaks to his disciples. Imagine we are gathered around Jesus on the hillsides of Jerusalem and you are surrounded by olive trees and grape vines and he is teaching. As you heard me read through these verses there is one word that should have stood out more than any of the other, that is the word abide. 11 times in these verses Jesus uses this word and so you would think that it is fairly important. You would think that we should understand what he really wants from us. He wants us to abide, live with him. If you are new here we find ourselves on a Sunday where we simply go through the Covenant Renewal service and we promise to abide with Jesus in 2018. We confess that we have not abided with him as we should have in 2017 and we offer up our sin knowing that our lives in 2018 ought to be a better reflection than last year was.

The term abide in greek is meno which means to remain or to stay. The assumption that Jesus has, and which we ought to have, is that you have been with him all the way up to now, make sure that you stay, that you remain with Jesus. So Jesus’ words, and frankly this covenant renewal service, is directed much more to those within the faith, than those outside of the faith. Jesus’ words are directed to those who have tasted the fruit of the vine and have been his disciples and it is an exhortation to remain his disciples. Do you see why we do this every year? We do this so that we can be reminded of how important it is to remain on the vine.

But Jesus also speaks about branches that do not produce fruit and cut off. Yes, we remind ourselves to remain with Jesus, but he tells us it is not enough just to be a branch on the vine, you have to bear fruit. I spoke with a former member of mine who is a big oil executive so has everything he could ever want financially. I spoke to him last year and he said: I feel like my relationship with Jesus is strong, I just feel like he wants something more from me. I encouraged him to go to Taize, spend some time there and then we will talk. I spoke to him on Friday and he was changed, completely transformed. He said, Bob, the difference was that while I felt all along that my relationship with Jesus was strong, I discovered that it wasn’t enough. I needed a relationship with my neighbor that reflects a giving and a living that places others first.

Bearing fruit requires a relationship where we abide in Jesus and as a result of that relationship we do not hesitate to reach out to our neighbor. This is how fruit is born. We bring others alongside to abide in Jesus as we go along our journey. King Josiah did this, he gathered all the people to renew a covenant before the Lord. He required them to be brought face to face with the fruit that they are bearing among each other which the Scripture requires us to bear. Jesus tells his disciples here to abide in him and in that way the Father will be glorified.

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. King Josiah tore his clothes when he heard the words of Scripture again for the first time. 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 2018, 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 font and take it home as a reminder of the covenant that you made today.

Let us now renew our promises before Almighty God.