



“God So Loves the World: A New Year with Our Covenant Friend”

Homily by the Rev. Patricia Farris

Revelation 21:1-6a

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he 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.” And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

In 1775, John Wesley introduced a covenant service as an important part of the spiritual life of the people called Methodist. This renewal service was a time to gather annually for self-examination, reflection, and re-dedication of their lives to God.

For Wesley, what it meant to be a mature disciple of Christ was the joining of believers in a covenant "to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul" and to love our neighbor as ourselves. He urged his Methodist followers to renew, "at every point, our covenant, that the Lord should be our God."

By the end of Wesley's life, the service was observed typically on the Sunday nearest January 1st. The covenant renewal service has undergone revisions and adaptations over the years, but its purpose as a pledge of commitment to ongoing discipleship and Christ-like character has always remained.

This morning, as New Year's Eve falls on a Sunday, we are taking this opportunity to experience this service ourselves.

On one side of this covenant is God, who comes in love to be with us and promises to give us new life in Jesus Christ. Every day God shows goodness and grace to us. God's steadfast faithfulness endures forever. From Deuteronomy we hear: "the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations." God is our Covenant Friend, Wesley said.

On the other side of this covenant, we stand as those who promise to no longer live life for ourselves but as God's beloved children desirous of a loving, life-giving relationship with God and our neighbor that is transformational. Wesley prayed: O God, "You are now become my Covenant-Friend, and I through Your infinite grace am become Your Covenant-Servant."

You know, sometimes we get a little confused about who God really is to us and for us and we make God into some kind of controlling, mysterious, often angry, puppet-master. Try and let all that go. Wesley says it beautifully—God is our Covenant Friend. We can grasp this, for all covenantal relationships—friendship, marriage, congregation, community—are about love and promise, about forgiveness and persistence, about patience and humility, about potential and transformation. And this is the very nature of God's love for us.

This covenantal relationship is at the heart of what the kingdom of God is all about. In covenant with God and one another, we find hope. We experience belonging, extend and receive forgiveness, and discover a sense of purpose and direction. We learn to live with appreciation and joy. Covenant renewal is a renewal of our ability to notice and experience God in our midst, and of our desire to partner with God in achieving God's aims for the world, in being part of God's work for justice and peace.

Covenant renewal occurs many times in Scripture. Many generations have done this before us. Today we make the covenant our own, renewing with both joy and sincerity the covenant that binds us all to God and to one another.

LITANY OF COVENANT RENEWAL

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.
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.
Today we meet, as the generations before us have met,
to renew the covenant that binds us to God.
Let us make this covenant of God our own.

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 easy and honorable,
others are difficult.
Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,
others are contrary to both.
In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.
But 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 up myself to your will in all things.
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 all to your pleasure and disposal.
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 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.
Second, be serious and in a spirit of holy awe and reverence.
Third, claim God's covenant,
rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength,
so you can keep your promise.
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.

Benediction:

In this new year may we all find the courage to allow ourselves to be led by God, our Covenant Friend, into our own new beginnings.

Notes:

Adapted from John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service (for today), seedbed.co,

And from excerpts from June 2008 "Leadership & Congregational Development Newsletter" by Church Consultants Dan Smith & Mary K. Huycke

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