

Covenant Service Meditation

Sterling UMC
January 1, 2012
Various Scriptures

The phrase, "This year will be different," was probably said more times than people can count last night. "This year will be different because I am going to the gym at least twice a week." "This year will be different because I will finally have the nerve to stand up for myself at work." "This year will be different because I will finally get myself organized." "This year will be different because I do more to help others." It is the time of year to set those New Year Resolutions. Those attempts to change things in our lives that we want to change but only change for a month before it is too hard and we give up. A resolution is simply an intention that is announced. There isn't much binding to it.

Covenant on the other hand goes much deeper than that. A covenant is a binding promise to do or not to do something. It seems to be an old word that isn't used very much in our everyday language. We don't hear of people signing a covenant anymore. We may talk about the marriage covenant between two people but beyond that the word and idea seems ancient. Today, we will be moving into a covenant with God as we promise to follow him in this coming year and move into a deeper and more intimate relationship with him.

First of all let's remind ourselves of what a covenant means. There are five great covenants in the Bible. The first one we usually learn in Sunday School when we were children. After God flooded the world but saved Noah and his family from it through the ark God made his first covenant. Genesis 9 says, *"God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'I am now setting up my covenant with you... so that never again will all life be cut off by floodwaters. There will never again be a flood to destroy the earth.'*" And you probably remember the symbol of that covenant. God placed a rainbow in the sky as a symbol of the covenant. God made a covenant not to flood the entire world again and has kept his promise.

A few chapters later in Genesis we read of the second great covenant between God and Abraham. The first three verses of Chapter 12 say, *"The LORD said to Abram, 'Leave your land, your family, and your father's household for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you.'*" God promises Abraham that his decedents will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. His family will be God's special people and God will never forget them.

Eventually Abraham's decedents turn into slaves in Egypt. As they are suffering under Pharaoh's regime God remembers his covenant with them and His promise to save them. He uses this man named Moses to bring his people out of Egypt and then for 40 years they walk the wilderness learning to be God's people. It is while they are in the wilderness that God calls Moses up to Mt. Sinai and gives him their covenant. Exodus 19:3-6, *"The LORD called to him from the mountain, 'This is what you should say to*

Jacob's household and declare to the Israelites: You saw what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to me. So now, if you faithfully obey me and stay true to my covenant, you will be my most precious possession out of all the peoples, since the whole earth belongs to me. You will be a kingdom of priests for me and a holy nation. These are the words you should say to the Israelites." For the next five chapters Moses gives the Israelites the law. The Ten Commandments start it off but it keeps going after that. The law was God's covenant between Him and his people, but as you know they were not too good at keeping it.

What is unique about this covenant is that it is temporary. Through the prophet Jeremiah God says, *"The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the LORD. No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the LORD!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins."* God promises to open up his covenant to include all of humanity, and erase all sins from the world.

Then when David was King God made another covenant to bring forth this idea of a new covenant. We read about it during this time of year. 2 Samuel 7:12-13 states *"When the time comes for you to die and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your descendant—one of your very own children—to succeed you, and I will establish his kingdom. He will build a temple for my name, and I will establish his royal throne forever."* This lineage that God sets up is found in the first part of Matthew and Luke's gospel. Matthew and Luke follow the lineage of David to prove that Joseph is from line of David. Both of these lineages prove that Jesus followed the covenant that God had planned out. If not Jesus could not have been the Messiah because God would have broken his covenant with humanity.

Then on Christmas morning, God put on flesh and dwelt among us. It is in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we receive a new covenant. As Hebrews 9:15 puts it, *"This is why he's the mediator of a new covenant: so that those who are called might receive the promise of the eternal inheritance on the basis of his death. His death occurred to set them free from the offenses committed under the first covenant."* In our liturgy for communion we echo this idea. I hold the cup up and quote from 1 Corinthians 11, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Every time you drink it, do this to remember me."*

God's new covenant is found in his Son. It is what his son did that makes it possible for God to fulfill all the previous covenants with humanity. It is through Christ that God can call anyone his people because it is through the Word that became flesh that we can be called children of God. It is through his suffering, death and resurrection that our sins

are forgiven and we can be restored. God loves us. God loves you. And it is through his Son that we learn of this great love for everyone.

The purpose of this service is to remind ourselves of our commitment to God and to reaffirm our promise to follow him. John Wesley adapted this service and wrote about it many times in his journal. On New Year's Day in 1775 he wrote, *"It was, as usual, a spiritual experience...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 backslidings."* Usually when Wesley would visit a Methodist home they would hold this service while he was there.

Traditionally they are held on New Year's Day in order to start off the year right by telling God that we will make a covenant with Him to follow him and do his will.

And that is what we do this morning. So let us take a moment to prepare ourselves to make this covenant. You will see the liturgy for the service in your bulletin. Please follow along. It is very interactive and you have a lot of things to say. But please do not say them haphazardly. Say them with meaning and say it from your heart. So now, let us ready our hearts and souls to make a covenant with God for 2012.