

"HOW TO MAKE THIS YEAR DIFFERENT"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The New Year provides us with the opportunity to begin again. In recent days I've heard people say that they're glad that 1983 is finally behind us with all of its troubles. It's as if the problems we encountered in 1983 belong to that year and now that the year is over, those things are behind us. The old year is gone; the New Year is here. The New Year even has a new name. It's not 1983 anymore. It's 1984. It's as if it were a new ballgame - the same opponent, but another chance to score a victory.

And that's why we make our New Year resolutions. No more desserts in 1984. This year I'm going to discipline my life. I'm going to improve my mind. I'm going to read the Bible every day. The New Year is a time for new beginnings supported by our resolutions - and that's good!

A COVENANT

But I want to suggest that on this first Sunday of a new year that Christians do something else in addition to making some New Year's resolutions - and that is to renew an old covenant.

There is a significant difference. A resolution is something that you do by yourself with your own strength. A covenant, on the other hand, is a relationship that you enter with someone else, in which you are dependent on that other person.

John Wesley said that we ought to begin each new year renewing the covenant that we have with God, and he wrote a service for that purpose. It's called, "Watchnight Service" and perhaps some of you have shared in this service at other times, in other places. For the most part it has fallen into disuse in Methodist Churches lately.

Wesley said that we are not just to make promises to ourselves, but that we are to gather at the beginning of a year and remember the promise that God has made to us. And so this morning I want to talk about covenants and particularly the covenant that God has made with us. And there are three areas of our life in which we live by covenants. I'd like to touch on each one.

FRIENDSHIP

The first is friendship. Friendship is based on the covenant of loyalty. Yes, remember that beautiful line from the film, "It's A Wonderful Life". "No man is a failure who has friends".

Augie Ratner died several years ago in Minneapolis. He had been a bantam-weight club boxer as a young man. In his later years he owned a restaurant in downtown Minneapolis. He had many friends and the loyalty of his friends was very important to him.

In 1971 Augie Ratner attended the funeral of a friend and was impressed with all the people who were there. He wondered if anybody would attend his funeral, so he wrote an open letter and printed it in the newspaper. It read like this:

"I attended the funeral of a dear friend who had been ill and out of circulation for a long time. It would have warmed his heart to know that so many friends had not forgotten him. But he will never know. Therefore, I would like to know in advance what my funeral is likely to draw..."

"If you plan to attend my funeral of whatever unpredictable

date, please drop me a line at the above address so that I may know whether to expect you..."

Well, I don't know how you would interpret a letter from a friend who said he would be delighted to attend your funeral, but Augie Ratner interpreted it as a testimony of friendship. He received hundreds of letters from friends saying they would be there.

I think it was in 1980, about eight years after the letter, a large crowd attended his funeral - several hundred people jamming the funeral home. They were friends. That's why they were there. They told Augie that they would be there, and so they came.

Augie was a little eccentric for us, I suppose, but in one way he's like all of us, because we know that friendship consists of a covenant of loyalty. Over the years there is nothing that means as much to us as the loyalty of friends. We may have a lot of acquaintances and associates with whom we have some kind of reciprocal or contractual relationship. They provide company for us, and good times and assistance along the way, but the friendship is so often determined in large part by the circumstances of our life, our work, or our geographical location. When we go back to the place where we grew up we sometimes discover that those we thought were our best friends were just first, and that the real friends are those who are bound to us with strong ties, unspoken promises of loyalty and shared values.

If you've ever gone through trouble or pain in your life, there have been those that you thought of immediately, and you wanted them to know. When they finally called, you may have said, "I knew that you would come". That's what friendship is. There is a covenant among friends based on loyalty.

MARRIAGE Secondly, marriage is a covenant because in its essence marriage is a promise of fidelity. There are those who think they have redefined marriage in our time as a contract, hoping thereby to insure happiness by guaranteeing each person's rights and duties. But a contract is not a marriage. A marriage is called a covenant by the Church for a good reason - because it's held together on a freely given promise of fidelity.

Marriage is held together by life's most fragile bond - the promise of another human being. During the course of a marriage that bond is strained, it's put to stress and sometimes it snaps and breaks. Not even our best resolutions, not even our most heroic efforts at renewal can save it, for like all things human, covenants are subject to human effort and frailty.

So it takes courage to enter a covenant of any kind - but especially marriage because you are trusting your life to somebody else. You are becoming dependent. But if it holds, we know that our lives will receive a blessing that no other relationship will offer: the certainty that there is one who knows me, who loves me, and who will always stand beside me.

GOD The covenant of friendship. The covenant of marriage. And finally, the third relationship in our life that is based on a covenant - our relationship with God. For like friendship and marriage, it cannot be contractual. You can't enter the relationship with God, saying:

"Let's make a deal. I'll do this for you if you'll do this for me."

It won't work that way. The only way it works is through a covenant of trust.

Of all the religions, Christianity and Judaism are religions of covenant. The Bible is divided into two testaments - the Old Testament and the New Testament. Testament means covenant. The Old Testament was initiated by God in that event that we call the Exodus in which He promised the Jews that He would support them and guide them, and bring them to the promise of their life. And He did it. In grateful response to His grace, the Jewish people covenanted to be His people and to obey His laws. The Old Testament, therefore, is really the history of Israel discovering that though they often failed in the covenant, God was always faithful. Though they were always making New Year's resolutions to do better, God always kept His promise to be with them and to support them, and to lead them to the fulfillment of life.

In the New Testament a new covenant is announced, only it's not really any different from the Old. Except this time, everybody's invited - not just one nation of people. Now God makes the covenant with all people. That's why Jesus told those parables about banquets where everybody is invited. They throw away the guest list and go out into the highways and byways and bring everyone in. This time the covenant is for everybody.

The other difference is that this time God Himself came to be with us to show us that He will always be with us, to show us that He is not some distant God who doesn't know what it's like to be human. He's like a friend who knows you from what He's been through with you.

AT THE END

So at the end, with the disciples in the Upper Room, Jesus takes the symbols of the old covenant, the unleavened bread and the cup of wine, the symbols of Israel's suffering in Egypt and He reinterprets them. He says these are now the symbols of the suffering that He is about to endure for us which will be the sign of the new covenant.

"This is my body, broken for you, and this is the cup of the new covenant for you." "Always remember what I have done." "Greater love has no man than this that a man lay down his life for his friends."

So you see the heart of religion is really not that much different from the heart of friendship, or the heart of marriage - for all three speak to the deepest need we have, and that is to know that there is someone who is faithful and who will always stand by us. It involves loyalty, fidelity, trust.

That is why it is less important for you to make a New Year's resolution than it is for you to renew the old covenant - for you may not keep the promises that you make, and others may not keep the promises they make to you. So it's important that you remember that the God who made the covenant, the promise to the Jews and renewed it in Jesus, in this communion offers it again to you. This cup is the new covenant for you and for many.

There is an old story about some botanists who were looking for a rare flower on some land that was owned by a man who had a son. They found a very fine

specimen of this rare flower growing on a ledge far down a steep cliff. They asked the boy if he would allow them to tie a rope around his waist so they could then lower him over this precipice so he could fetch this rare specimen of the flower. They said he would go on one condition, that they would let his father hold the rope.

So let us take communion this morning and use it as a time to renew the covenant that God offers us, to remind us that as we enter this New Year we have a promise from the Father that holds the rope of our lives, a promise that He will never us go, nor let us down, nor let us fall.

"I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year,
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the un-
known'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and
and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be
to you better than a light, and safer than any known way'"

LET US PRAY O God, our Father and our Creator, as we embark upon the
difficult and hazardous ways of the year that now lies ahead,
give us the will to live - gladly, confidently, and the grace to accept and take
anything that comes to us, knowing that thou art about our ways guiding us,
sustaining us, helping us to reach the goal.

Grant, O Lord, that we go fearlessly into this New Year with our eyes
open, our hearts pure, and our hands ready to serve and to minister to those who
need us. Strengthen and deepen our covenants with You and with each other.
In the name and spirit of our Lord, Jesus Christ.