

“Covenant Renewal”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
New Year’s Day, January 1, 2017

Scripture Readings: Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13

Revelation 21:1-6

(by The Rev. Catherine Somerville)

Here’s the problem with preaching the New Year’s Day sermon. It is so predictable, so cliché. I know that you know what you want me to say. And you know that I know that we have heard it all a thousand times before. Thankfully, though we are saved by two compelling scripture texts, which can help to give us a vision as we look forward.

First, Ecclesiastes. Whenever I hear these popularized verses, I can’t help it, but I hear Doris Day singing in the background... “Que sera, sera...Whatever will be, will be.”

That is certainly the flavour of this reading, so very different from the rest of the Biblical story, which reminds us that God is in charge. The text from Ecclesiastes tells us that there is lots of time, and that it’s not our job to figure out our beginnings or ending, but at the end of the day, our primary role is to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we can. Eat, drink and be merry. It was that “whatever will be, will be” attitude that made those compiling the individual books of the Bible into the canon of scripture to have some serious conversations about the place of Ecclesiastes.

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven. God is right here in the ordinary day by day pieces of our living.

The reading from Revelation is most often heard at the times we are trying to sort out what calamity means, and that view has certainly limited how we see this text. It reminds us that God is dwelling in our midst. Our sacred story begins in a garden, where we are told that God is at the genesis of all things. God looked around and saw that it was good. The end of the story takes place in the Holy City, New Jerusalem. The ending is promised to be just as good, with the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. For God is dwelling with the people, and we are promised that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

What these texts seem to be doing is telling us what we already we know. Life isn’t always good. On Thursday, when I was coming into the church, there was a panel of commentators talking about the year past. They described 2016 as the year of ‘UGH’, for there was such a sense of sadness and resignation in the air. Either on

the world stage or in our own lives, relationships seem to have grown cold and sour. We have been hurt and disappointed. Things appear unjust and rather senseless. Answers aren't easy to come by. Even our noblest intentions have been accompanied by failure and discouragement.

Thank God - literally, thanks be to God for giving us faith to share, and offering us a much different vision. What we are being called to hold tight to, is our knowledge that at the centre of the story is Jesus, and the promise he makes for us that all things shall be made new. That is where we find ourselves, in this place where God is making home among us. Again we hear the news that God is right with us, in the everyday pieces of our living.

It's an incredible vision to carry, for it tells us that there is room for hope, and for believing a new day is dawning. In our ordinary chores and errands, and all the encounters we have day by day, this knowledge reminds us that will come face to face all the time with the divine. We are offered a relationship filled with joy and strength which comes from knowing that as God's people, we are facing the world together.

This morning I want to give you two gifts, which might help you understand what this could look like in our life.

The first gift is a practice that has its origins in the writings of St. Ignatius. It called the Examen. At the end of each day, you are invited to ask yourself two simple questions:

For what moment today am I most grateful?, and
For what moment today am I least grateful?

The practice of asking yourself these two questions helps to grow awareness. We take another look back over our day and the things which might at first appear to be insignificant. These simple encounters along with awareness, can lead to the moments which ultimately give us direction for our living.

It helps those of us who tend towards pessimism to feel good and see the blessings in our lives. It helps those of us who are perfectionists to re-focus on the positive, rather than brooding over the little pieces of negative. When we can name that for which we are least grateful, we can acknowledge the hurt and begin to heal. If we go to bed grateful, we will awaken saying thank you. This practice helps us to hear God through all the moments of our living.

Let's try it.... I invite you to think quietly for a moment: What am I most grateful for on this day? What am I least grateful for?

I guarantee that following such a practice will change your life.

The other practice is recommitment. On New Year's Day, John Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism in the eighteenth century, would invite his parishioners to rededicate their living to God. In a sermon preached on the first day of 1780, he called the members of the congregation to fix their hearts and minds on three guiding principles:

1. that eternal things are more enduring and real than earthly things;
2. that there is more certainty in things that cannot be seen; and,
3. that we all have to make a choice how we live. He called it turning to the right hand or the left hand. While attending services and prayer meetings, taking communion and helping others are necessary, they are empty practices unless the heart welcomes Jesus.

“When you have chosen God to be your portion and happiness, when you have laid all your hopes on Christ, casting yourself wholly upon the merits of His righteousness, when you have thoughtfully and heartily given yourselves to him, then you are Christians, a willing people dedicated to Jesus.”

After the people were asked to search their hearts in prayer, they were invited to read the words of the covenant together. I have done this practice for many years. It helps me to remember. It helps me keep my focus.

Today, I would invite you to join me in this New Year's Day promise. It is an opportunity for you to reaffirm and renew the faith proclaimed at baptism. It helps to mark our place in the family of God, for we are making this covenant together, and telling one another that we will walk side by side in the journey of faith. We make this covenant with a sense of joy, with a deep awareness of gratitude, as we rededicate ourselves to the life and work of the body of Christ.

The words of the Covenant are on the screen... And they are in your bulletin, for my hope is that you will take that piece of paper home and read it over, and figure out what this promise means for your life.

The words of John Wesley invite us to recommitment. I will begin with the words taken directly from the 1780 New Year's Day service, but I have used a contemporary version of the actual covenant.

And now, beloved, let us take the yoke of Christ upon us. This means that we are heartily content that he appoints us our place and work, and that he alone be our reward. Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are difficult. Some bring honour, others bring reproach. Some are suitable to our natural inclinations and temporal interests, others are contrary to both.

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves. In others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us. Therefore let us make the covenant of God our own. Let us engage our hearts to the Lord, and resolve in his strength never to go back. Being thus prepared, let us now, in sincere dependence on God's grace and trusting in God's promises, yield ourselves anew to God.

I would invite you to stand - either in body or in spirit - and together we will share the words of the John Wesley's covenant...

I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will; put me to doing, put me to waiting; let me be put to work for you or set aside for you, praised for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. And now, O Wonderful and Holy God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be made in heaven. Amen.

Let us pray... God, you have called us to share life in abundance. You have invited us to be your people. We accept the joy and love of Christ into our hearts, and we will seek to do your will on earth, just as you dream of in heaven. We are no longer our own. We are yours. And we dedicate our living to Jesus, in whose name we make this covenant. Amen.

Sources used:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Easter 5, Volume 2, articles by Dana Ferguson and Michael Pasquarello, pages 464-466. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009

Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life, Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, Matthew Linn, Paulist Press, 1995. (The Examen)

John Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service, sermon preached on January 1, 1780

Richard Bott, Gathering-Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, 2016-2017, page 37
(Contemporary version of John Wesley's covenant)