

Thursday
December 31, 2020

Watch Night; John Wesley's Covenant Renewal

Pastor Greg

Becoming disciples,
serving God's world.



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Introduction

In 1775, John Wesley introduced a covenant service as an important part of spiritual life in the Methodist Societies. This renewal service was a time for the Methodists to gather annually in a time of self-examination, reflection, and dedication, wholly giving up themselves and renewing covenant with God. Repentance through confession and commitment is a key focus of the service.

Wesley found the service rich and meaningful, as expressed in his Journal: "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted" (April 1756); "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing" (October 1765). "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 backslidings" (January 1, 1775). In London these services were usually held on New Year's Eve (Watch Night) or New Year's Day. Around the country the Covenant Service was conducted whenever John Wesley visited the Methodist Societies.

The heart of the service, focused in the Covenant Prayer, requires persons to commit themselves to God. This covenant is serious. It demands humility from those willing to submit themselves to the dynamic words stated within the liturgy.

This is gritty discipleship that can only be grown into — but that was John Wesley's expectation for Methodists. We end the pandemic year of 2020 and begin 2021 by going back to our Methodist heritage anticipating that John Wesley's Covenant Renewal will be an annual feature of our life together.

*For this online service, Brad Addis (lay leader) will speak the **bold print** on behalf of the congregation who are invited to participate from their homes.*

Greeting

Lord, You have been our dwelling place in all generations,
You are the one true God who reigns forever.

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, you search our hearts and you see every part of us. All our desires are known to you, and from you no secrets are hidden. By the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, cleanse our hearts so we may perfectly love you and glorify your Holy Name. We pray this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

**Now as God's dearly loved children, let us pray together:
Our Father...**

Scripture Lesson: 2 Kings 23:1-3 (NRSV)

Then the king directed that all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem should be gathered to him. The king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him went all the people of Judah,

all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the priests, the prophets, and all the people, both small and great; he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant that had been found in the house of the Lord. The king stood by the pillar and made a covenant before 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 in the covenant.

Hymn: A Charge to Keep I Have

Scripture Lesson: John 15:1-8 (Kingdom New Testament)

'I am the true vine', said Jesus, 'and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't bear fruit; and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it can bear more fruit. You are already clean. That's because of the word that I've spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you! The branch can't bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains in the vine. In the same way, you can't bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. People who remain in me, and I in them, are the ones who bear plenty of fruit.

Without me, you see, you can't do anything. 'If people don't remain in me, they are thrown out, like a branch, and they wither. People collect the branches and put them on the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want, and it will happen for you. My father is glorified in this: that you bear plenty of fruit, and so become my disciples.'

Proclamation

Dearly loved brothers and sisters, the Christian life is a life found in Christ, redeemed from sin, and consecrated to God. We are those who have entered into this life and have been admitted into the new covenant of Jesus Christ. He is the Mediator of this covenant. He sealed it with his own blood so it would last forever.

On one side of this covenant stands God, who promises to give us new life in Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith. Every day God proves his goodness and

grace to us, showing us that his promise still stands firm. On the other side, we stand as those who promise to no longer live life for ourselves but instead to only live for Jesus Christ because he has loved us and given his life for us.

There are times in our lives when it is important for us to remember and reaffirm our promises and vows. In this same way, we come at this time to renew our covenant with God. Many generations have done this before us. And now we make the covenant our own, renewing with both joy and sincerity the covenant that binds us all to God.

Confession

We are those who seek to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ, but sometimes we fall short. Let us now examine ourselves before God, humbly confessing our sins and submitting our hearts so that we do not deceive ourselves and cut ourselves away from God. (Silence.)

Let us pray:

Father God, you have set forth the way of life through your Son Jesus Christ, whom you love dearly. We shamefully confess that we have been slow to learn of him and have been reluctant to follow him. You have spoken and called to us but we have not listened. You have revealed your beauty to us, but we have been blind. You have stretched out your hands to us through our friends, but we have passed by them. We have accepted your gifts and offered little thanks. We are unworthy of your unchanging love.

We now confess to you our sins:

Please forgive us for the poverty of our worship...for the selfishness of our prayers...for our inconsistency and unbelief...for the ways we neglect fellowship and Your grace...for our hesitation to tell others about Christ... for the ways we deceive others...

Forgive us for when we waste time and when we misuse the gifts you have given us. Forgive us for when we have made excuses for the wrong things we have done and when we have purposefully avoided responsibility. Forgive us that we have been unwilling to

overcome evil with good and that we have not been ready to carry our cross. Forgive us that we have not allowed your love to work through us to help others and that we have not made their suffering our own. Forgive us for those times when instead of working for unity we made it hard for others to live with us because of our lack of forgiveness, inconsiderate judgment, and quick criticism.

Forgive us for when we have not tried to reconcile with others and when we have been slow to seek redemption.

Forgive us also for these sins that we silently confess to you now. (Silence.)

Assurance and Pardon

God, the Father of all mercies, is faithful to cleanse us from our sins and restore us to Christ's image. Praise and glory be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.

Wesley Covenant Prayer Visual Meditation

Invitation

Let us before the Lord now in covenant commit ourselves to Christ as his servants. Let us give ourselves to him so that we may fully belong to him. Jesus Christ has left us with many services to be done. Some of these services are easy and honorable, but some are difficult and disgraceful. Some line up with our desires and interests, others are contrary to both. In some we please both Christ and ourselves, but then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Jesus Christ, we offer you this prayer:

Let me be your servant. Let me follow your commands. I will no longer follow my own desires. I give myself completely to your will.

The power and strength to live as true servants is given to us in Christ. We accept the place and work that he gives us, acknowledging that He alone will be our reward.

I am not my own. I am Yours alone. Make me into what You will. Rank me with those You will. Put me to use for You. Put me to suffering for You. Let me be employed for You. Let me be laid aside

for You. Let me be lifted high for You. Let me be brought low for You. Let me be full or let me be empty. Let me have all things or let me have nothing. With a willing heart, I freely give everything to Your pleasure and disposal.

Christ is Savior to those who are his true servants. He is the source of all salvation to those who obey. To be his servant is to consent fully to his will. Christ accepts nothing less. Christ will be all in all, or he will be nothing. Now confirm this truth in holy covenant. Make it a reality in your life in these three ways:

First, set apart time in your day, more than once, to be spent alone with the Lord. Seek to perceive God's special care for you and gracious acceptance of you. Carefully think through the words of this covenant and its conditions. Examine your heart, even if you have freely given your life to Christ. Name the sins in your life. Reflect on whether you are willing to choose Christ's holy laws and strict commands. Be sure you are clear in all of these so you do not lie to God!

Second, uphold a serious spirit of holy awe and reverence.

Third, claim God's covenant. Do not trust in your own strength and power but rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength. In this way, he will empower you to keep your promise.

Fourth, be determined to be faithful. You have given your heart and life to God. You have opened your mouth to dedicate yourself to the Lord. With God's power, never go back to your former way of living.

And last, be prepared to renew your covenant with God. Fall on your knees. Lift your hands. Open your hearts.

Covenant Prayer

Let us pray together:

My righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, see me now as I fall down before you. Forgive my unfaithfulness when I have not done your will. You promise mercy if I turn to you with my whole heart.

God requires that you rid yourself of every idol in your life.

From the bottom of my heart, I here and now renounce every idol in my life,

covenanting with you that I will not commit any known sin. By turning against your will I have turned my love toward the world. In your power I will watch for any temptation that will lead me away from you.

Through Jesus Christ, God offers to be your God again, if you allow him to be.

Before all heaven and earth, I here and now acknowledge you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as my Lord and God. I vow to give all of myself, body and soul, to be your servant and to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

Jesus Christ is the only way and means to God. God has given us Jesus as the way and means to salvation.

Jesus, I here and now accept you and the only new and living Way. I join myself in covenant with you. I come to you hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked, unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants. With all my power, I accept you as my Lord and Head. I renounce my own unworthiness, and vow that you are the Lord, my righteousness. I renounce my own wisdom and take you for my only guide. I renounce my own will and take your will as my law.

Christ has told you that you must suffer with him.

Jesus, I here and now make this covenant with you and accept whatever comes in life. Through your grace I promise that neither life nor death will separate me from you.

God has given holy laws as the rule of your life.

I here and now willingly take on your yoke and burden. All your laws are holy, just, and good. I accept them as the rule for my words, thoughts, and actions, promising I will strive to order my whole life around your direction. I will not allow myself to neglect anything I know to be my duty.

The Almighty God searches and knows you, even the thoughts of your heart.

O God, You know that we have made this covenant today in sincerity, without

deceit or reluctance. If you find anything false in us, guide us and help us to set it right. And now, glory be to you, God the Father. From this day forward, I shall look upon you as my God and Father. Glory be to you, God the Son. You have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood. From this day forward, I shall look upon you as my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit. By your almighty power, you have turned my heart from sin to God. From this day forward I shall look upon you as my Comforter and Guide. O mighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have now become my Covenant Friend. And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant. You are mine and I am yours. So be it. May this covenant that I have made here on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen.

Hymn: Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee

Dismissal with Blessing

May our God, who establishes covenant relationship with those who seek to enter the kingdom, be with you always. May Jesus Christ, who seals the new covenant with his blood on the cross, bring you peace. May the Holy Spirit guide your life both now and for ever. Be in peace to serve the Lord!

Amen.

Please tuck this Covenant Renewal in your Bibles for review throughout the year.

Note: This modernized liturgy is by Dr. Jonathan A. Powers, Assistant Professor of Worship Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary. From the Seedbed website — www.seedbed.com.

VUMC's Mission Statement (The General Rule of Discipleship) — "To witness to Jesus Christ in the world and to follow his teachings through acts of compassion, justice, worship and devotion under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."