

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 2:15-21  
Numbers 6:22-27  
Psalm 8  
Philippians 2:5-11

January 1, 2023  
New Year's Day

---

As we start the New Year, grateful that 2022 is behind us and hopeful that 2023 will bring about a little more peace and stability, it seems to be a good time to talk about resolutions.

Now...I am not a fan of New Years Resolutions. Not at all. But this year I must admit that I have found myself reevaluating my life a little more than usual. Shoring up the things that matter most, identifying the things that I should be doing, the things I need to let go of, and the things that I should recommit to.

It's a powerful trend I am seeing right now...folks coming back to their core values and trying to bring meaning back into their lives. It doesn't seem to be as appealing these days to be overly self-focused or to give time and energy to things that really don't matter. The isolation of COVID taught us many things. And, for many of us, it taught us that we want and need faith to play a more central role in who we are.

You might say we are hungry to share life with each other and with God.

So as I thought about resolutions, I realized that they simply weren't going to cut it. Not this year. I didn't want to make a resolution to myself, a self-improvement manifesto to work out more, read more, or rest more. I want something bigger, with more meaning, and maybe you do it.

Let me suggest that we don't need resolutions at all. Why? Because a resolution is often "me" focused. The things I need to do. The things I want to do. And, be honest...how often do we actually stick to our resolutions? Usually by the end of January they have faded away into the file cabinet of New Year's past collecting dust.

So instead of resolutions, this year, let's think about making covenants. Covenants aren't self-focused. They are communal focused. They take more than one person and they work to bring people together. Covenants also work to bring us closer to God, to recenter our lives on the faithful practices that heal our souls and strengthen our communities. When we make a faith-based covenant, we don't want to simply feel like a better Christian, we want to experience a thriving Christian life.

And, so I want to offer to you this morning a New Year's litany that was first used in 1755 and created by John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church. Now for you liturgy lovers...we do have a New Year's liturgy in the Episcopal Church but the Methodist liturgy is more powerful in my opinion. The Episcopal liturgy is a series of prayers and scripture while the Methodist liturgy specifically names our needs, specifies our challenges, and walks us through how a

covenant with God will look. And, if you are like me, sometimes step by step instructions are quite useful in helping us stick to our commitments.

Here is how Wesley gives those step-by-step instructions for a covenant. He begins with a call to participate in a relationship with God. To make a decision to enter into a covenant. Listen to a selection of his words...

*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 more easy and honorable,  
others are more difficult and disgraceful.  
Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests,  
others are contrary to both....*

Let me stop there for a moment. Wesley is saying that our covenant with God starts with our willingness to serve Christ. We have to want to do it. And that in serving Christ, we experience a range of things...some good, some difficult. Some we will enjoy. Others we will not. As directly as possible, Wesley tells us that no covenant is one-sided. We will have ups and downs together.

Wesley goes on to write...

*Lord, make me what you will.  
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 it all to your pleasure and disposal.*

After stating the reality of a covenantal relationship with God Wesley goes on to give more specific instruction on how to apply this covenant with God to our lives. I will paraphrase what he says...

First, set apart some time...to be spent alone before the Lord....

Consider what your sins are. Consider the laws of Christ, how holy, strict, and spiritual they are, and whether you, after having carefully considered them, are willing to choose them all.

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. Trust not your own strength and power.

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.

Set aside time for God. Take it seriously. Trust God. Keep at it. These are the steps.

And, once we have resolved to live this covenant in these ways, we are to pray...

*O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,  
see me as I fall down before you.  
Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will,  
for you have promised mercy to me  
if I turn to you with my whole heart....*

That's the power of our Covenantal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God's loving care. Our source of comfort and reason. Our source of hope and healing. Our light in the darkness.

Will this covenant solve everything? No, it won't. Remember at the beginning that Wesley acknowledged that a life lived in covenant isn't always what we desire. Life will be tough. God will need us to do difficult work at times.

But God commits to doing the work with us. And God isn't going to let you go.

*Lord, make me what you will.  
I put myself fully into your hands:  
put me to doing...  
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 it all to your pleasure and disposal.*

Amen.