

“The New Covenant”

Exodus 24:3-8, Mark 14:22-24

January 11, 2015

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

I hope that you have had a great start to the New Year. I wrote a New Year's greeting, “Happy New Year” to one of my friends and she responded that she didn't realize that new was already here. Do you have a similar feeling? Some of us reflect how fast time flies by. There is a Korean saying that when you are in your twenties, you feel that time flies at 20 miles an hour, in your thirties 30 miles an hour, and then in your sixties, 60 miles an hour. What about eighties? Does this make sense to you? No matter how fast or slow your time flies by, I would like to send you a new year's greeting again: Wishing you all a Happy New year with hope that you will have many blessings in the year to come!

Now here we are in January 2015. According to the Roman myth, the name of January is derived from Janus, the Roman god of beginning and transitions. This god is depicted as having two faces, since he looks to the future and to the past, presiding over the beginnings and endings of conflict. As we enter into 2015, I hope that we let go of the past and make a fresh start with great resolution! What is resolution? How does God fit into the idea of resolution? It is covenant. We church people often use the term “covenant” in the Bible and in our spiritual life. If “resolution” is a “to-do” list for your own better life, “covenant” is God's special promise and agreement between God and His people.

This morning, I invite us all to explore God's New Covenant and hear God's special promise. Our first Old Testament reading describes how God made a covenant with the Israelites through Moses up on Mount Sinai. Simply speaking, the Old Testament is all about the covenant between God and God's chosen people, the Israelites. But the Israelites didn't keep the covenant. They turned away from God and the relationship was broken. The key words to understand the entire Old Testament and covenant are renewal and restoration.

In the same sense, the New Testament is all about a new covenant with God's people. Now, in the New Testament, the Covenant is not Moses' Ten Commandments, but Jesus Christ- Emmanuel God who became our new Covenant. God wants to restore His relationship with us through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our New Covenant in which we can find a new life, love and hope in Him.

In December, we celebrated the arrival of the New Covenant. Now the Christmas season is over. At church and at home, we are taking down our Christmas decorations. Truly, Christmas seems to be over! Last Thursday, I came back from study leave. The purpose of study leave is to prepare for a new year's preaching themes and ministry plans for a new year. When I got home, there was the Christmas tree and lights shining. I knew that I had to put away this big Christmas tree, ornaments and lights as soon as possible and I have a lot of work ahead of me. But on that night, while I was looking at the Christmas tree, I took a moment to reflect on the beauty of Christmas again. I like the Christmas season, simply because people seem to be happier at this time of the year.

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't tell us more stories after the Advent event. What happened to the shepherds after they found the baby Jesus in Bethlehem? Where did they go? What would have happened to the three wise men who traveled and worshiped a new born King from the East? Where did they go? What about Mary and Joseph? Where did they go? Where did Christmas go? I believe that they returned back to their work fields and ordinary life places. I am sure that the shepherds went back to the fields and continued to watch over their flocks as they had done every night. But they now had a new Covenant in their hearts. They found a new life, new passion and a new hope. I am sure that the same excitement was found in the three wise men's hearts as they were on the way back to the East. They had traveled from more than 800 miles away, far from their home because of their strong desire and anticipation. It must have been a journey of uncertainties, anxieties and challenges, but now they found assurance, truth and experienced transformation in their hearts. It must be the same to both Mary and Joseph. Lastly, then, where did the baby Jesus go? I hope that the baby Jesus comes to each of our hearts and is born, lives, and continues to grow in us as Emmanuel God, "God is with us". This is the Spirit of Christmas and is the new Covenant that God made for us! You have probably already packed your Christmas decorations and I hope that you didn't put the spirit of Christmas with them. Let's carry the Spirit of Christmas, "God is with us" as our New Covenant throughout this new year.

This spirit of Christmas and the New Covenant was handed down and rekindled by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism back in the 1700's. After he experienced God's personal touch on his soul and God's grace, he dedicated his whole life and passion for God and for people who never heard about God's good news. He never put out his fire for God until he died. When Wesley died in his late 80's, he talked to his colleagues and friends saying, "The best of all, God is with us!" As you know well, Methodism wasn't a denomination

movement, but it was a renewal movement from the Anglican church. The beginning of spirituality starts from our covenant with God like John Wesley's confession. "I am no longer my own but yours" as Moses and Israelites made this covenant with God. John Wesley kept his faith until the last moment of his life.

Early Methodists had covenant renewal services every year on New Year's Day. It is not our practice but we know that our Tongan language ministry had their own New Year's Week service. Through the covenant service, they confirmed their relationship with God and renewed their commitment to Christ. Standing in the first month of a new year, we would like to honor and follow the Spirit of early Methodists renewing our faith and covenant with God. Here is the covenant prayer that early Methodists shared at the covenant renewal service. Let's read this prayer in unison.

*I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
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 thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen (John Wesley's Covenant Service, 1780)*

I hope and pray that we all renew our covenant with God and make a fresh start for a new year's journey together. May God be with you! Amen.