

December 27, 2020

Message: Renewing the Covenant for the New Year
Preaching: Craig Sumey
Scripture Text: Hebrews 9:13-15

This worship gathering will be a little different than normal. But it plugs into a centuries old tradition. Starting in the 18th century, it became a tradition for Christians to gather together for a vigil service to mark the turning of the new year. This became an opportunity to renew their covenant relationship with God. Over the years, the service came to include prayers, liturgies, singing of hymns, confession, time for reflection, and sharing fellowship. Some have even brought in the symbolic time of “burnt offering” or ‘olah’ as a way to express this rededication to God. We’re going to incorporate many of these elements today in a way I hope you find powerful.

As we cross the threshold into 2021, it’s an opportune time to draw close to the Lord and reevaluate our lives. What are our priorities? Are they in line with God’s? How will we use this coming year? How strong is our covenant relationship with God? How will it grow stronger?

Scripture

Psalm 139 is a psalm ascribed to King David and emphasizes God’s ‘omnipresence’ – or, put another way, the idea that no matter where we are, or what year we find ourselves in, or what challenges we face, God is in all places and times working His purposes and will. So, it’s a good scripture to start the new year with.

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

The 10 Commandments define our covenant relationship with God, and show us how God expects us to live and relate to him and to others. Let's prepare for our time of reflection by reminding ourselves about the relevance for today of these great commandments...

Exodus 20:2-17

I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me.

No loyalty comes before my loyalty to God. I worship and serve Him alone.

You shall not make for yourself an idol...or bow down to worship them.

Idolatry is when I treat anything other than God as if it were God, and when I assume my own interests are more important than anything else.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord

I should use God's name with reverence and awe, not carelessly or to support wrong.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

God requires worship to be at the center of my life.

Honor your father and mother

God wills me to listen to my parents, be thankful for the benefits I received from them, and be considerate of their needs.

You shall not murder.

Murder or injury can be done by direct violence or by an angry word or support of injustice. I should honor every human being as a person made in God's image.

You shall not commit adultery.

Since love is God's great gift, God expects me not to corrupt it or confuse it with momentary desire.

You shall not steal.

God forbids unjustly taking what belongs to someone else. I should trust the promise that God will supply my needs.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

God requires me to speak the truth, to speak well of my neighbor when I can, and to view the faults of my neighbor with tolerance when I cannot.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house or anything your neighbor owns.

My heart belongs to God alone, not to money or things of this world. I should not allow envy to corrupt my heart.

O Gracious God, we thank you for your patient and steadfast love. Help us to be faithful to your covenant love. Enable us to be the people you desire us to be. And beginning this night, may we always strive to live according to your Word. Amen.

Hebrews 9:13-15

13 For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

15 Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.

Reflection/Message - "Time for 'olah"

So is anyone contemplating making a New Year's Resolution this year? Start exercising, go on a diet, take up a hobby, spend more time with family, keep in contact with friends...

Anyone feeling like you've made Resolutions before, and they're usually toast by mid January?

Problem with resolutions is what they are based on – a decision of the personal will. Resolutions typically are based on the capacity within your natural and rational self – the power of mind and fortitude of heart, to carry out anything we reasonably choose. We don't hire others to carry out our resolutions for us.

People who follow Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior do not believe they have this power within themselves. As they examine their lives, they see a track record of wanting and doing what is contrary to life, and being unable to consistently want and do what is sustaining to life.

But God does have the power to change us. And he does change us, making us into the image of His Son, Jesus, the only human who had the power to live perfectly – because He was both human and God. And if you believe in Jesus Christ, you also believe that if you make a covenant with God and ask for his strength to do what he calls you to do, you can be assured he will give you what we need to keep that covenant, no matter what..

So we know there are areas in our life which need to be brought into conformity with the image of Christ – but we are not going to make a Resolution today. We are going to make a covenant before God, based on belief and trust that if we rely on his strength, He can keep that covenant in us.

Idea of making covenant goes back to the Old Testament and the concept of the "'olah." Israel's center of worship was the Temple in Jerusalem. A key component of worship was offering up sacrifices and making offerings to God.

A principle sacrifice was the burnt offering: an animal which was purchased by the believer, given to the priest, and then the priest sacrificed that animal, perhaps also sprinkling its blood on the altar. Sounds yucky to us today, but it was an important, sacred, and powerful part of the worship of the people of God back then. The smoke from the sacrifices would drift into the sky, symbolizing a pleasing odor going up to God which was the faithfulness of his people.

There were several types of burnt offerings. One was the *'olah* or the whole burnt offering.

Some burnt offerings could be taken off the altar and parts could be eaten in a fellowship meal or given to the priests of the Temple to sustain their work. But *'olah* offerings had to be totally burned up and consumed in the fire until there was nothing left.

This is how the *'olah* worked (you can find it in Leviticus 3): A believer would bring a bull, sheep, goat or bird to the Temple. Before it was taken away by the priest, the believer would lay his hands on the animal. This symbolized a transfer of himself to the animal so the animal now represented him. He would make his confession of sin and rededicate himself to the Lord as he prayed to the God. The priest would take the animal, kill it, then prepare it for the sacrifice in a separate building. It's blood would be sprinkled on the altar and the whole animal would be placed in the fire upon the altar. As the whole sacrifice was consumed in the fire, this represented a total surrender of the heart and life to God. Nothing would be withheld.

You may have noticed that we don't do sacrifices and burnt offerings anymore. You don't have to buy a goat before coming to church. There's no huge altar with a roaring fire down the front steps. Part of my job description as pastor isn't to kill animals, and have their shed blood poured out. Why? Because Christians believe Jesus, God's Son, became the perfect, once and for all sacrifice for all sin.

In Revelation 5, Jesus is portrayed as the Lamb who had been slain. God's Word is talking about the sacrificial lamb for the burnt offering. It says *"Because you were slain and with your blood you purchased people for God."* In Hebrews 9 and 10, scripture talks about Jesus becoming the sacrifice for us when he shed his blood on the cross: *"How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!"*

So, when you make a burnt offering today - it is not the power of the piece of paper or the flame that renews you and cleanses you, it is the power of Jesus Christ in your life. The question is – will you rely on that power or your own to be changed?

So what covenant would be your best offering today, at the beginning of the new year?

A difficult, but important place to start is with **areas of your life which need to be transformed by the power of Jesus**. We all have these because we all fail to live by the Spirit as God commands. We put ourselves in situations where we are enticed to do things which destroy rather than add. We intentionally avoid doing what God wants us to do. We don't make an effort to serve others. We develop years of bad habits and turn away from God's power to break them. We trade joyful life for a few moments of shallow happiness followed by loads of guilt and shame. We underestimate the power of evil in our daily lives, which pull us away from the Lord.

How can you realize God want to forgive our sins, admit our sins, receive forgiveness in Christ, and allow him to loosen the hold sin has on you? What situations can you start avoiding? What bad habit can you allow God to break? What mindsets can God change to bring you into deeper obedience?

A good place to go next is **spiritual disciplines** - the practices which become a spiritual armor protecting us from sin, and which bring us into deeper joy of obedience and closer relationship with God. Just a few examples of disciplines include: Daily study and meditation on God's word, Consistent life of prayer - keeping focused on God, Worshiping regularly with the family of faith, Taking time out for reflection and reflection - like keeping a sabbath or regular spiritual retreats, Tithing to God's work in the church

What disciplines do you feel God calling you to implement in your life? Don't burden yourself with the "how's" and practical questions. If the Lord wants you to do it he will provide the way to do it.

Next, look at your **relationships**: Are there broken relationships with parents, children, brothers and sisters or friends that God wants to heal through you this year? Those important relationships - with children, spouses, co-workers, neighbors –

How is God challenging you to strengthen them, give more of your time and energy to them this year? Make relationships more purposeful for God's kingdom - eyes open in 2004 for opportunities to serve, be compassionate, heal, share Jesus Christ, invite into the church?

Finally, in what ways does God want to "**expand your territory**" starting this year? Not by getting more money, power or possessions, but wanting to do greater and more meaningful things for the Lord. Get more involved in what the Lord is doing in mission. Learn your spiritual gifts and make a difference through ministry. Make a giant step forward in your business or family life this year so you're able and more blessed to do more.

This isn't just for adults, but also kids can think about the covenant you want to make to God this year.

What does God want you to do for him?

Read your Bible

Work harder at school

Be a nicer friend

Be a better helper for your parents and teachers

Make an offering every week to God

Tell a friend about Jesus

So today, you have the opportunity to make a burnt offering sacrifice and make a covenant with the Lord for your growth starting this coming year. It starts with accepting the sacrifice made for you by Christ Jesus when he shed his blood for your atonement of sin on the cross. That could be your *'olah* today, receiving Jesus as your Lord (absolute leader) and Savior (forgiver). You may also have sins to confess, disciplines you feel called to start, relationships God wants to strengthen in your life, territories to be expanded for his glory and purposes to fulfill.

Write them down on a slip of paper.

Take these quiet moments to reflect on your life and write down your thoughts.

This is voluntary. Only participate if you feel led by God to do so.

This is very serious. This is a covenant you are making before God.

Do not write what you want to do or change, but what you know and believe God wants to do or change in you.

Don't write anything you are willing to totally burn up, and in so doing completely abandon and surrender yourself to God so he can accomplish it in you. But write with hope and confidence, knowing that God never asks his children to do something he doesn't give them the power to do and which he won't do through them.

Prayer

When you are done, just silently lay *both your hands on your paper and pray this prayer as we pray in unison together*:

Covenant Prayer

(based on *Wesley's Covenant Service*)

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me where you want me, near whom you want me to be close to.

Put me into action. Put me into suffering for your sake.

Let me be exalted 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 willingly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

You are mine and I am thine. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Amen.

If you can safely do so, place your slip of paper in a firepit or fireplace and watch as it completely burns up as your offering towards your covenant with God.

Benediction

The year is ended, but our life in Jesus Christ goes on.

We go now, in his name, into all the world. Let our light so shine and our joy be so obvious, that all who see us will come to praise God!

Amen.