

Keeping Promises

Luke 2:22-40

John Breon

Janus was the Roman god of gates and doors, beginnings and endings. He was represented with a double-faced head, each face looking in opposite directions. People worshipped Janus at the beginning of harvest time, planting, marriage, birth, and other types of beginnings, especially the beginnings of important events in a person's life. Janus also represents the transition between primitive life and civilization, between the countryside and the city, peace and war, and the growing-up of young people. The name of the month January comes from Janus ("Janus." Encyclopedia Mythica. 2010. Encyclopedia Mythica Online. 30 Dec. 2010 <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/j/janus.html>).

We look back at God's promises and forward to their fulfillment. We remember how God has been faithful and expect that God will be faithful now and in the future.

Forty days after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary brought him to the temple to present him to the Lord in consecration and dedication. They were also fulfilling the law that required a woman to offer a sacrifice of purification forty days after giving birth. They are faithful to the Law, to the covenant God had made with their ancestors.

And while they're in the temple, an old man approaches them. His name is Simeon. He's been looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises. He knows God's promises in Scripture—and he's received a personal promise from the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the Messiah. Prompted by the Spirit, Simeon recognizes Jesus. Inspired by the Spirit, he prophesies:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.

Simeon blesses Mary and Joseph, then he speaks to Mary about Jesus:

This child is destined to cause the rising and falling of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.

Another prophet was in the temple, a woman named Anna. Well into her 80s, she lived at the temple and was always fasting and praying. She gave thanks to God and talked about this child Jesus to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

In this story we see promises and their fulfillment. God is one who keeps promises. It's all rooted in covenant. We hear words like salvation, consolation, redemption, revelation. We see remembering, waiting, and looking forward.

A covenant is a binding agreement between two parties. There were several kinds of covenants in the Ancient Near East, the world of the Old Testament. The word we translate "testament" could also be translated "covenant."

There are five major covenants that provide the spine, the central outline of the OT: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David.

Simeon and Anna knew those covenants. They knew the Scriptures and the promises of God. But Simeon also had a specific and personal promise from God. And he rejoiced in seeing it fulfilled. Having seen the promise fulfilled, he could accept his death as a release from duty. Anna saw the fulfillment and gave thanks to God. She also saw that God was going to do even more for his people.

Jesus fulfills the law. His family obeys the law. Jesus was born and lived under the Law of Moses. Through the prophets, God had also promised a new covenant. Jesus established the new covenant. He fulfills God's promises. He's the new Adam who obeys and brings life instead of sin and death. He's the Righteous One who delivers his people similar to how Noah and family survived the flood. Jesus is the seed of Abraham who

pioneers the way of faith. Jesus is the prophet like Moses who fulfills the Law's requirements and puts an end to the sacrifices by giving himself once and for all. Jesus is great David's greater Son, the Messiah, the King, the Lord. Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and King.

The fulfillment of the old covenant and the beginning of the new covenant start as Jesus' parents obey the law, as he is fully dedicated to God the Father.

I've recently listened to some sermons by John Ortberg at Menlo Church in California (<https://menlo.church/>). He did a series based on "The Serenity Prayer" by Reinhold Niebuhr. We're most familiar with the first part of it and it's used in Twelve Step Recovery Programs. Here's the full version of it:

God, grant me the Serenity
To accept the things I cannot change...
Courage to change the things I can,
And Wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His will.
That I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen.

http://www.prayerfoundation.org/dailyoffice/serenity_prayer_full_version.htm

Ortberg took each of the three phrases at the beginning of that prayer and tied them to the Christmas story. Mary is the model for "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." Remember how she said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). That brought her into experiences she hadn't dreamed of. And now

Simeon tells her that her child will cause many to rise and fall and that a sword will pierce her own soul. She still accepted that. Even when Jesus said, "Who are my mother and brothers? Those who do God's will are my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:33-35). That sword pierced her soul when she stood at the foot of the cross of Jesus. How could it be? Yet, she was granted the serenity to accept. And, after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, she was with the apostles and other disciples in the upper room praying (Acts 1:14).

What are we called to accept that we can't change? Can we know God's peace and serenity whatever comes?

Bob Benson was a preacher and author and publisher who battled throat cancer for several years until his death in 1986. In one of his books, he tells about a Christmas when he felt most wonderfully blessed. His children would all be home. Bob and some of his family and friends had the privilege of leading the Christmas Eve service at their church. And just before Christmas he found out that he would not have to have the surgery in January that had been anticipated.

But he goes on to tell about some families who didn't have such good news that Christmas: a young couple in their church whose apartment had burned a few days before Christmas; some family members who couldn't make the trip to be with the rest; a friend of theirs who lost the struggle with cancer and was buried just before Christmas.

Still, it was Christmas—because *Jesus is born*. There is no Christmas without Him. And all the rest is just tinsel on the tree.

And Christmas is the time to sing those eloquent, life-giving words—
"Jesus is born, Jesus is born."

Just as those words came and changed a barn filled with cows and straw into a shrine, a hillside dotted with sheep and shepherds into a cathedral, a sky filled with stars into a message from the Father—so they come to you:

as old as eternity—
as fresh as the morning—
as simple as a baby—

as majestic as a psalm—
Warm as a mother's arms—
Mighty as God Himself—
Jesus is born.

All of the celebrations of our Christmases begin at a manger with Him.

We say, Merry Christmas, because He is our joy and our happiness.

We say, Goodwill to men, because He is our peace and our pardon.

We say, Good tidings of great joy, because He is our announcement and proclamation.

We say, Good cheer, because He is our hope and our confidence.

We say, Emmanuel, because He is with us.

We sing, Glory to God, because His light blesses us.

The light shined in the darkness and it still shines, and shines, and shines. And when our lights flicker and die—when those with whom we have long celebrated are gone—when we can no longer share needs or exchange gifts or sing songs—it will still be Christmas because Jesus is Born, Jesus is Born. (*In Quest of the Shared Life* 90-95)

Joseph is the model for "courage to change the things I can." He showed quiet courage at every step. Joseph is the one character in the Christmas story who doesn't speak. But he is noble and righteous and courageous.

What's God calling us to change—in our lives? in the church? in our community? in the world?

A video that has been viewed millions of times tells the story of one man's change. The woman who produced the video is a member of Menlo Church teold some of the background of the story.

Eric O'Grey had become unhealthy, overweight, and lonely. He had to do some traveling for his business. He was so overweight that he barely fit into the airplane seat. The flight was delayed because they couldn't find a seatbelt extender big enough for him. Another passenger said to him, "I'm going to miss my connection because you're so fat."

Eric was devastated. That was his low point. He went home after that trip and prayed for the first time in his life. He asked God to kill him. But he felt a Presence. He became aware of God being with him and caring for him. He got a Bible and read it for the first time. He read it cover to cover in a month. Again, he felt God's presence.

Eric called a nutritionist to get help with his eating. She also suggested that he get a dog and start walking it. He went to a shelter and asked for a middle-aged, overweight dog. He adopted Peety. They started walking together then running together. Eric's diet changed. One of his goals was to run a marathon, which he did.

After the video of his story went viral, a woman he had known years before—his high school girlfriend—contacted him. They had lost touch. Not, after forty years, they got back together, fell in love again, and got married.

After Peety died, Eric felt the urge to adopt another dog. He went to the shelter and found a dog that had just been brought in. The dog, Jake, looked at Eric like, "Dude, let's get out of here." They started preparing to run a half marathon together. Courage to change the things we can.

[http://mutualrescue.org/film/eric-peety/;](http://mutualrescue.org/film/eric-peety/)
<https://menlo.church/series/it-is-well#/modal/message/3536/mlo>

"Wisdom to know the difference." Obviously, the Wise Men, the Magi, model that for us. God spoke to them in ways they could understand. God used the wisdom they had to reveal more wisdom to them, to show them the source of wisdom. God used their search for a king to show them the true King.

Where do we need wisdom? God says if we'll ask for it, he'll give it. A deeper question for us is, who rules our lives? Who's on the throne of our heart? We're designed to allow God to rule there.

The complete dedication of Jesus to the kingdom of God, to God's covenant mission invites us and embraces us when we enter in.

John Wesley often used a service of covenant renewal as he traveled around England. He found this service to be powerful and a tool God used to deepen commitments people made and to renew people in their faith. As we hear God's call again and pray this covenant prayer, some may

commit ourselves to the Lord for the first time. Others may renew our commitment to the Lord. Either way, let's hear God's call and let's respond with covenant faithfulness and love.

Wesley's Covenant Service

INVITATION

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.
In some we may please Christ and please ourselves.
But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ
 except by denying ourselves.
It is necessary, therefore,
 that we consider what it means to be a servant of Christ.
Let us, therefore, go to Christ, and pray:

**Let me be your servant, under your command.
I will no longer be my own.
I will give up myself to your will in all things.**

Be satisfied that Christ shall give you your place and work.

**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.**

Christ will be the Savior of none but his servants.
He is the source of all salvation to those who obey.
Christ will have no servants except by consent;
Christ will not accept anything except full consent
to all that he requires.

Christ will be all in all, or he will be nothing.
Confirm this by a holy covenant.

To make this covenant a reality in your life, listen to these admonitions:

First, set apart some time, more than once,
to be spent alone before the Lord;
in seeking earnestly God's special assistance
and gracious acceptance of you;
in carefully thinking through all the conditions of the covenant;
in searching your hearts
whether you have already freely given your life to Christ.

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.

Be sure you are clear in these matters, see that you do not lie to God.

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.

And last, be then prepared to renew your covenant with the Lord.
Fall down on your knees, lift your hands toward heaven,
open your hearts to the Lord, as we pray:

COVENANT PRAYER

**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.**

God requires that you shall put away all your idols.

**I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all,
covenanting with you that no known sin shall be allowed in my life.
Against your will, I have turned my love toward the world.
In your power
I will watch all temptations that will lead me away from you.
For my own righteousness is riddled with sin,
unable to stand before you.**

Through Christ, God has offered to be your God again
if you would let him.

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

God has given the Lord Jesus Christ
as the only way and means of coming to God.

**Jesus, I do here on bended knees accept Christ
as the only new and living Way,
and sincerely join myself in a covenant with him.
O blessed Jesus, I come to you,
hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked,
unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants.
I do here, with all my power, accept you as my Lord and Head.
I renounce my own worthiness,
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.

**I do here covenant with you, O Christ,
to take my lot with you as it may fall.
Through your grace I promise
that neither life nor death shall part me from you.**

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

**I do here willingly put my neck under your yoke, to carry your burden.
All your laws are holy, just, and good.
I therefore take them as the rule for my words, thoughts, and actions,
promising that I will strive
to order my whole life according to your direction,
and not allow myself to neglect anything I know to be my duty.**

The almighty God searches and knows your heart.

**O God, you know that I make this covenant with you today
without guile or reservation.
If any falsehood should be in it, guide me and help me to set it aright.
And now, glory be to you, O God the Father,**

**whom I from this day forward shall look upon as my God and Father.
Glory be to you, O God the Son,
who have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood,
and now are my Savior and Redeemer.
Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit,
who by your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God.
O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you have now become my Covenant Friend.
And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant
servant.
So be it.
And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven.
Amen.**

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/covenant-renewal-service>

Also in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* #291)

