

Renewing the Covenant
Luke 2:21-40
January 1, 2012

Introduction.

Happy New Year! Here we are on the first day of the new year. And you know what that means, the chance to get started on those New Year's resolutions you have made. It is also the season to enjoy watching college football bowl games.

How many of you have you made your list of New Year's resolutions yet? This is our chance to wipe the slate clean of our 2011 failures and start all over in 2012.

Here are some New Year's resolutions experiences that maybe you can relate to.

(For Better or Worse- realistic resolution)

This one comes from the "FOR BETTER OR WORSE comic strip": The family is sitting around the breakfast table and father says, "Well, here we are in a brand new year. I think we should all make some resolutions, don't you?"

MOTHER: "O.K. I resolve not to criticize, to nag less and to bake more often."

FAMILY RESPONSE: "Right on! Neat! Yeah!"

FATHER: "I resolve not to lose my temper, and to fix all the things in the house that need repairs."

FAMILY RESPONSE: "Great! OK!!!"

ELIZABETH: "I resolve to brush Farley (the dog), to keep my room clean and not to fight with Michael."

RESPONSE: "Good!"

MICHAEL: "I resolve to play road hockey, hang out with my friends, and to watch more TV."

MOTHER: "Wait a minute! We all made real promises. Your resolutions are worthless."

MICHAEL: "I know...but at least mine will be kept!"

(George's resolution- not started yet)

Some of us may make resolutions like one man,
named George. He said to a friend: "There"s nothing like
getting up at six in the morning, going for a run around the
park, and taking a brisk shower before breakfast."

His friend Bob asked, "How long have you been doing
this?"

George: "I start tomorrow."

I think I can relate most to the following New Year's
resolution experience.

(Teacher failed 1st day)

At the beginning of a new year, a high school principal decided to post his teachers' new year's resolutions on the bulletin board. As the teachers gathered around the bulletin board, a great commotion started. One of the teachers was complaining. "Why weren't my resolutions posted?" She was throwing such a temper tantrum that the principal hurried to his office to see if he had overlooked her resolutions. Sure enough, he had mislaid them on his desk. As he read her resolutions he was astounded. This teacher's first resolution was not to let

little things upset her in the new year. (illustrations from
esermons.com)

I look forward to the New Year because it represents a chance to start anew, maybe not in everything. I have been unable to convince anyone to wipe the slate clean on my debts each year. But it is an opportunity to start over in being a better husband and father and in being a more faithful Christian and better Christian witness, and in living a more disciplined life. It gives me hope for renewed success after all of my failures in these areas last year.

I. The Covenant.

In making these New Year's resolutions, we set out with a goal of keeping these promises that we make to ourselves and to others. This morning we are celebrating the New Year by using what is known as Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service. John Wesley established this covenant service as an important part of early Methodist life. He wrote in his Journal, that in one of these services he urged the people to wholly give up themselves to God and renew in every point their covenant, that the Lord should be their God.

What exactly is a covenant? A covenant is an agreement between two people or two groups that involves promises on the part of each to the other.

Marriage and baptism are two covenants that we celebrate in the church.

Covenant is also the primary way that the Bible portrays the relationship between God and His people. In the Old Testament, God made a covenant with Abraham and promised to bless His descendants and to make them His special people. Abraham, in return, was to remain faithful to God and to serve as a channel through which

God's blessings could flow to the rest of the world (Gen. 12:1–3). God's covenant with Abraham was made (Gen. 15:18) and confirmed (Gen. 17:2) to guarantee that Abraham's descendants would be innumerable and that they would receive the Promised Land. The sign of this covenant was circumcision and for Christians today, the sign is baptism.

II. Mary & Joseph's faithfulness.

In our bible text today, we find Mary and Joseph being faithful in their covenant with God.

Verses 21-24 read, “Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel even before he was conceived.

²² Then it was time for the purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. ²³ The law of the Lord says, “If a woman’s first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord.” ²⁴ So they offered a sacrifice according to what was required in the law of the Lord—“either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” (NLT)

In obedience to the Jewish law, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to God (see Exodus 13:2-16) and offered a sacrifice for the ritual purification of Mary (see Leviticus 12:2-6). Jewish families went through several ceremonies soon after a baby's birth:

The first ceremony was circumcision. The law required that every Jewish boy be circumcised and named on the eighth day after birth (Leviticus 12:3; Luke 1:59-60).

Circumcision symbolized the Jews' separation from Gentiles and their unique relationship with God (Genesis 17:9-14). Mary and Joseph named their son Jesus, *the*

name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb (1:31). Jewish custom also included a charge to raise the child according to biblical law.

The second ceremony was “Redemption of the firstborn.” A firstborn son was presented to God for God’s service one month after birth (Exodus 13:2, 11-16; Numbers 18:15-16). This is much like what happened to Samuel in the Old Testament. The ceremony included buying back—“redeeming”—the child from God through an offering. The Levites would carry out the priestly responsibilities that would become the child’s. Through

this, the parents would acknowledge that the child belonged to God, who alone has the power to give life. So Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

The third ceremony was the purification of the mother. For forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter, the mother was ceremonially unclean and could not enter the temple. So at the end of Mary's time of separation, they went to the temple to present Jesus to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law as part of Mary's

purification. Mary and Joseph were to bring an offering—a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or pigeon for a sin offering. The priest would then sacrifice these animals and declare the woman to be clean. If a lamb was too expensive, the parents could bring a second dove or pigeon instead, which is what Mary and Joseph did.

III. Jesus was filled with Wisdom & the Grace of God was upon Him.

Why did Mary and Joseph go to all this trouble? Was it because they were afraid they would face some punishment if they neglected the law? Was it because it

was the thing to do? As a good and faithful Jewish couple, the law was very important to them. But I believe their reason went much deeper. They took the spirit of the law to heart.

They went to all of this trouble because their obedience to the law was a sign of the faith in their hearts.

The last two verses of our text, verses 39-40, say “³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he

was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.” (NIV)

I think all of this happened in part because of Mary and Joseph’s commitment to God.

Jesus' life gave the evidence of being filled with the Spirit. He grew physically. He became strong spiritually. He was filled with wisdom which refers to his intellectual growth. And the grace of God was upon him, which means he grew in God’s will. Wisdom and God's grace indicated the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life. Jesus, like any child, developed from an infant to a toddler to a

young child. He learned to crawl, sit up, walk, and finally to run. He learned to eat and talk. In many ways he was probably a typical child.

But he also grew spiritually and into God's will for his life. Now he was God himself which gave him an advantage over the rest of us for spiritual growth. But I believe that Mary and Joseph also played a big role in his growth. They took seriously their responsibility to their covenant with God and it was evident in the growth of Jesus.

Conclusion.

As Christians, we have had a similar experience as Jesus. Through our baptism, our parents dedicated us to God and promised to raise us according to Christian teaching. Through their teaching and our involvement in the church, we have grown spiritually. And through our spiritual growth, we grow in God's will for us. As Christian parents we seek to do the same for our children.

But along the way, the same thing happens to us that happens in our New Year's resolutions. We mess up and fail to keep the promises we made in our covenant with God. But the good news is that God gives us a chance to

start over, just like each New Year is a chance for a new beginning.

That is why we participate in Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service each year. A covenant has two parties: God and us. God is continuing to keep His promise to love and bless us and to redeem us. We have broken our promise to be faithful and love God with our whole being. In this Covenant Renewal Service, let us renew our promise to wholly commit ourselves to God and that the Lord should be our God.