

Today on the first Sunday of the new year we carry on a tradition that our Methodist brothers and sisters started on Monday, August 11, 1755.ⁱ It is called a covenant service. It is a time to start over in our relationship with God and renew the covenant that God has already started with us.

It is a time to put the past behind us and to move forward with hope. Sometimes we all just need to start over. A time of starting over in my life happened at Duke Divinity School.

I went there not knowing anyone, so I truly did get to start over. It was a wonderful time for me as this was the first time, I was surrounded by other people who felt God calling them to ministry. It was comforting and beautiful to attend worship almost every day and learn new things about the Bible. Towards the end of my time at Duke, and after completing three field education appointments at churches and a non-profit, I learned that **part of our identity as the people of God is to start over.**

The pattern of our faith is to follow God, turn away, repent, and come back to God. Time and time again in the Bible, we see that God allows God’s people to start over.

In the Old Testament in Exodus when the Israelites made a golden calf and worshipped it, God forgave them and let them start over.

In the New Testament when Jesus knew Judas would betray him, he still served him communion. He gave him another chance to choose life.

Time and time again God is also offering us this chance, but are we taking it? And are we taking it seriously?

The purpose of the baptismal renewal service today is to once again commit our lives to God and surrender to God’s will for our lives. We have already prayed the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer, saying the same words as our brothers and sisters in Christ so many years ago.

So the questions before us today is how will we live into this covenant renewal every minute of every day?

It’s a New Year and anything is possible, so let’s start this journey of faith together for the next year!

Our Scripture for this morning from the Gospel of Matthew we are reminded that we too are called to participate in Jesus’ ministry of renewal.

We see that Jesus came to see his cousin, John the Baptist. Now in Advent we remembered once again that this same John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus saying that he would come and “baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11).

The time has come for this prophecy to be fulfilled. In his humility John had thought that Jesus came to baptize him and his followers, but Jesus surprised him and told him that John must baptize him to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15).

So this holy moment happens and for the first time we see the presence of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.ⁱⁱ We see Jesus, the Son of God being claimed by God the Father. We see the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus in the form of a dove.

This marks the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. And so, for us, baptism marks the beginning of our new life with Jesus Christ.

We see that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River. That he went under the water and came out of the water and then God spoke.

In The United Methodist Church baptism is a sacrament, it is something that Jesus called us to do in the Great Commission when he said: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19-20).

In baptism we believe that whether you are sprinkled, poured water upon, or immersed, that the water symbolizes the cleaning of our sins made possible through our faith in Jesus Christ.

The United Methodist Church is one of the few denominations that baptizes children. We do this because it is biblical. In Acts 16 we see two instances where whole households were baptized together, including children.

First, we see a woman named Lydia. She heard Paul speaking about Jesus Christ and immediately she wanted a part in that life of faith. She was baptized with her whole family and then invited Paul and Titus to come and stay with her.

Second, in Acts 16, we see that Paul and Titus are in jail. A great earthquake happens and releases their chains, but instead of leaving they stay to save the life of the guard.

The guard was beside himself. All his prisoners were about to escape, for which he would probably be punished by death. So, Paul convinced all the prisoners to stay so he would not take his own life and they did.

Then the guard professed his faith in Jesus Christ, was baptized with his whole household and made a meal for Paul and Titus in his home.

In these two instances we know that children were part of these households. So, we believe it is good to baptize children as infants. In this way children are baptized members of the church. The parents of the children take the membership vows for them and the church covenants to help raise them in the faith.

We follow up with them in their faith journey when they are in sixth- twelfth grade as they go through the process of confirmation, where they accept their faith in Jesus Christ for themselves and make a public profession of faith and become professing members of the church.

The beautiful thing is all throughout Scripture we see baptism happen in many different ways to many different people of all ages. We also see that baptism always happens in community.

Another one of my favorite stories of baptism happened with Phillip the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. Phillip was reading a passage from Isaiah. Then Paul came alongside him and asked him if he understood what he was reading to which he responded: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). We see that God uses all of us to help others come to know Jesus Christ.

The very next chapter in Acts shows us where God uses a faithful man named Ananias to lead Paul to a safe place as he found himself blind after he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. Ananias did not leave his side and supported Paul as he professed his faith and was baptized.

On this day we remember our baptism and are thankful that God called us to be in relationship. Perhaps you have not yet been baptized and you are ready to move forward in this sacrament. Please let me know and we can schedule a time for that on Sunday morning.

God already invited us into this covenant through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but we must accept this gift. We accept this gift once again as we renew our baptismal covenant on this day.

In a few moments on your way back from communion, everyone will be invited to touch the baptismal waters. Then we will make the sign of the cross on our heads retracing the cross that was made at our baptism.

We renew our baptism because it is a wonderful reminder of what God has already done for us. God already sent Jesus Christ to save us. We live into this gift of salvation as we give thanks for God for the gift of resurrection and new life through our faith in Jesus Christ.

How will you make 2020 count in your spiritual life?

Today we also commit that we will be intentional about growing in our faith. This means that we commit to attending worship regularly, reading the Scripture and praying on our own, and also commit to try to attend a Bible Study of some kind.

This is how we continue to grow in our faith and experience the joy of our baptism. When we are baptized, we become part of the family of God, the body of Christ. That means we belong to God and one another.

So today may we celebrate with joy that God has invited us into this covenant of faith.

May we also be on the lookout to be like the Apostle Paul and Ananias and journey beside those who are still looking for God. My hope for our charge this year is that we can be more present in our community together as we represent the church.

There are so many people in need of God’s grace in Rappahannock County and we are called to journey alongside them as they come to know and accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

So, on this first Sunday of the month may we recommit our lives to God and remember that through our faith in Jesus Christ we belong to God and one another.

The good news for our lives today is that God’s grace is always available to us and we too are called to offer this grace to others. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

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

ⁱⁱ Keck et al. New Interpreters Biblical Commentary. Vol. III. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN. 1995. P. 161.