

January 1, 2012
Christmas 2, B
Luke 2:22-40

I don't know if you've ever thought about this before, but New Year's Day doesn't really exist within the church. I mean, it is January 1 today, and it really is the very first day of 2012, but liturgically, within the worshiping life of our Christian community our new year is behind us. It passed us by 6 weeks ago, when we celebrated the first Sunday in Advent, with our beautiful Lessons and Carols service. On that day we slipped quietly into a new Christian Year – no champagne, no balloons, no carrying on at midnight. More like a thief in the night, I suppose. Sort of a stealth new year.

The Christian community calls today The Second Sunday of Christmas, which is a 12-day season, as we all know from the partridge-in-a-pear-tree carol. So our reading this morning has nothing to do with New Year at all. Instead, it follows the chronology of Jesus' life, moving us gently down the path of his story, from birth last week, to presentation in the temple this week. According to Jewish custom, he is eight days old, and about to undergo the *bris* or circumcision ritual that would bind him, as it binds all observant Jewish males, to the covenant promises of God.

WHEN THE TIME CAME FOR THEIR PURIFICATION ACCORDING TO THE LAW OF MOSES, THEY BROUGHT JESUS UP TO JERUSALEM TO PRESENT HIM TO THE LORD (AS IT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW OF THE LORD, 'EVERY FIRSTBORN MALE SHALL BE DESIGNATED AS HOLY TO THE LORD') AND THEY OFFERED A SACRIFICE ACCORDING TO WHAT IS STATED IN THE LAW OF THE LORD, 'A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.'

I have to confess that I have never thought very much about Jesus being circumcised. Like most of us I'm a bit squeamish about anything that has to do with the body, especially certain parts of the body, although I know that every part of me is holy... there are some parts that I tend not to think about much in church. But here we are, at the beginning of Luke's gospel, at the beginning of Jesus' human journey with an undeniably Jewish ritual involving his body – and the body of two poor turtledoves, given in sacrifice as well.

There must have been a lot of blood – baby blood and dove blood - but the upshot of it was that Jesus joined his father and his father's father, and every Jewish male before him and since him in having a physical sign on his body of God's covenant promise. This is the promise that God made to Abraham, way back in Genesis 17: I WILL ESTABLISH MY COVENANT BETWEEN ME AND YOU, AND YOUR OFFSPRING AFTER YOU THROUGHOUT THEIR GENERATIONS, FOR AN EVERLASTING COVENANT, TO BE GOD TO YOU AND TO YOUR OFFSPRING* AFTER YOU.
⁸AND I WILL GIVE TO YOU, AND TO YOUR OFFSPRING AFTER YOU, THE LAND WHERE YOU ARE NOW AN ALIEN, ALL THE LAND OF CANAAN, FOR A PERPETUAL HOLDING; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD.'

That covenant had to do with the land, and the faithfulness of God. And Jesus could see the mark of it on his own body.

Many years later – many, many, many years later – long after Jesus’ death and resurrection, long after Paul, and the rise of the gentile church, and the fall of Rome and the Dark Ages and the Reformation... Are you still with me?... generations and generations later a man named John Wesley was also thinking about covenants.

He was a reformer – well, first he was an Anglican priest, but he struggled and fought against the empty, shallow thing that the Church of England had become in his day. Not in our day – some of my best friends are Anglicans – but in his day. The Church of England had become a church of the rich not of the desperately poor victims of the industrial revolution. It had become a church of the intellectuals, not touching the living, beating hearts, the joys and agonies of its parishioners. It had become a church of the ruling elite, not a church of the people, and Wesley, above all, was a man of heart, and a man of the people. He believed that Jesus came to set everyone free – not to give us a list of theological propositions to subscribe to, or a series of rituals to perform. He wanted religion to lodge here (heart), not just here (brain).

You’re wondering what on earth this has to do with Jesus, and the presentation in the temple – but stay with me, we are on a path! Wesley founded a movement, which because he wanted it to be methodical came to be called Methodism, although I don’t think he ever wanted to start a denomination of his own. He just wanted to encourage better Anglicans. And part of the method of Methodism was to be intentional about your own spiritual life, not allowing the priest to be spiritual for you, or the words of the prayer book to be spiritual for you, but each person taking responsibility for their relationship with God.

One of the ideas that Wesley came up with was a covenant – there’s that word! – between yourself and God. A covenant is more or less a promise between humanity and God. The Bible is a celebration of the covenants that God has made with us – the covenant of Noah, in which God promises not to destroy the earth; the covenant of Abraham in which God promises to be faithful; the covenant of Moses with ten commandments, and so on right down to the new covenant, in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Wesley came up with the idea of a covenant, a personal covenant to be made annually, and revisited through the year. He wanted Methodists to have a reason to commit their lives into God’s care and keeping, not just once, on their conversion, but regularly, so that they wouldn’t forget that they were God’s own people.

He developed a covenant renewal service in which people would commit themselves anew to God. He encouraged them to sign the covenant, and to keep a copy with them, in their pocket or in their wallet, and to remember it by reading it through the year.

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 for 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. (1)

It's beautiful, isn't it? I imagine that the Presbyterians who founded both First and St Andrew's churches might be shuddering in their graves right now, to hear this Methodist covenant being read from the pulpit – but anyone here from Metropolitan should feel right at home.

Wesley didn't really tell anyone when to make their covenant renewal, but over the years the Methodist church has tended to do it at the beginning of the year – sometimes even during a watchnight service on New Year's Eve. It's a pretty good time to recommit. Many of us make resolutions at this time of year: lose a bit of weight, stop smoking, exercise more. Why not add 'orient myself in God' to the list?

I'm not Wesley, and I'm not really into telling people what to do. But I can tell you what I'm going to do, and I can invite you to do it, too. I have copied the words of the Covenant Prayer into the bulletin – so we each have a copy. I am going to take my copy home and pray through it thoughtfully a few times – trying to make it my own. I am going to write it out in my own handwriting, and sign it – just like Wesley suggested. I think I'll keep it by my bed – but you could keep yours in your wallet, or on the dash of your car – wherever works for you. Every now and then this year I'll read it – maybe even aloud. I'll think about Jesus being presented in the temple, and the way he carried the Jewish covenant on his body... and the way he gave his body on the cross, for the new covenant of love.

It's a simple thing – but resolutions are pretty simple things after all. They are nothing but words, until a heart makes them true. The same with faith – and with love – you need to keep coming back to the commitment and making it again. And again. And again. It seems like a great way to start this new year.

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St. Andrew's United Church, London, Ontario
www.fsaunited.ca)

(1) From *The Book of Offices of the British Methodist Church*, 1936, found at UMPortal, <http://www.umportal.org/article.asp?id=6253>, accessed on Friday, December 9, 2011.