

MESSAGE – A Refreshed and Renewed Covenant

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So I really like the Christmas strings of lights we've used the last few years. Little dots of light on a thin copper wire. Easy to use and easy to store. And I find them very versatile. We use them on our tree and weave them through nativity scenes and Santa displays. My daughters have also strung them around their bedrooms through the years. (Gosh I sound like a commercial.) But this year, as I put them up, it seems like they don't shine as much, they don't put out as much light as they used to. And I don't know why. They aren't battery powered; rather they plug into the wall. And I don't know if there's anything I can do about it to make them shine brighter.

And I've thought a lot about these lights over the last few weeks – not just about their decorative aesthetic – but I've thought about them a symbol of spiritual life. That we might find over time and circumstances that our spiritual lives do not shine as bright as they once did.

The excitement of knowing Jesus and having a relationship with the very creator of the universe.

The wonder of unconditional love.

The relief that comes from knowing our sins are forgiven.

The certainty that God has made known to us how to live in peace...that God's plans for us is not some ambiguous, unknown or unknowable reality...but clear and understandable: *do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Love God and love your neighbor.*

Those are the bright lights of our faith, aren't they?

But have they dimmed within us?

I said about my strings of lights...

That I didn't know why they were dimmed....well we might be able to pinpoint why any of our spiritual light has dimmed.

- What if faith isn't as exciting as it used to be?
- If our spirits aren't as lifted?

- If we have become forgetful of forgiveness or acted out of sinfulness and tried to hide?
- What if we are coming off a hard year in which so much of our communal life was lost?

Any one of these things, and more, can perhaps dim the light of our faith. And we become like my strings of lights.

It has happened to others in our faith tradition:

Moses...

Elijah...

King David...

Judas...

The failures in our own spiritual lives is why I love the introduction to the gospel of John so much! Now John speaks in a different way about the incarnation of God in Jesus. We don't get the birth narratives like we do in Matthew and Luke which help us understand where Jesus came from. Rather we get a narrative that points to the eternal nature of Jesus. Let's listen:

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

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One of the most hopeful lines for me in my spiritual life is in this passage: *John 1:5 The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.*

*There is no* diminishing of this light

*There is no* extinguishing of this light

The darkness of sin and death *has not, cannot and will not* overcome the light.

The passing of time has not dimmed the light.

The volatility of human emotion has not covered his light.

This is what gives me hope....because I'm not hoping in myself and my own experiences, my own light.

Remember how I said about my strings of lights.... And I said I didn't know what I could do about them.

Well, there is something we *can* do to address our own spiritual dimness....

And that is to renew the connection to the very light of the world that came to dwell among us.

And so I would like to offer us the opportunity for covenant renewal.

Covenant Renewal has long been a part of the Methodist experience. John Wesley asked the first Methodists to use the New Year as an opportunity to renew themselves in the covenant with God. (Not that God needs to renew the covenant, but we humans do.) The straightforward nature of the service leads followers straight to the heart of the faith – and finds its place in the human heart. Wesley wrote as much in his journal about the covenant renewal service on January 1, 1775:

*It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences ... I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backslidings" (January 1, 1775)*

I'm going to lead us through a portion of that service now. There will be portions I will read and bold faced portions we will share in together. *I encourage you to read through the whole service. You can find it online doing a search using the words: covenant renewal service – UMC.*

So take a moment first and center yourself.

Come into awareness of the condition of your own spirit and your relationship with God.

Where has your zeal, your faith dimmed?

What needs to be refreshed or renewed?

Let us begin:

Having a full, life-giving relationship with God means putting away our idols, selfish will and evil ways as acknowledged in our baptism when we are asked if we renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of sin.

Asked to accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. And asked to confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as Lord. I call you today to renew -or join in- covenant with God.

**O blessed Jesus, I come to you hungry, broken, and spiritually blind and naked. I am tarnished by sin and therefore, if it were only up to me, I would be unable to be in a relationship with you. But your love for me is unparalleled and you have invited me into relationship. So with all my heart I accept you and take you to be my Lord because you are my Savior. Therefore I acknowledge:**

**I am no longer my own, but thine. Put me to what you will. Rank me with whom you will. Put me to doing; put me to suffering. Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you. Exalted for you 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 heartily 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 yours.**

Glory be to you, O God the Father!

**From this day forward, I look upon you as my God and Father, knowing that you are always looking for ways to recover sinners like me.**

Glory be to you, O God the Son!

**You have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood, and you are my Savior and Redeemer.**

Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit. By the power of your hand, you have turned my heart away from sin and back to you!

**O holy and powerful God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you are now my Covenant Lord and through your infinite grace, I am your Covenant Servant. So be it. And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.**

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I pray you let the meaning and power of this covenant have time and space in your spirit in the coming days so the light within you is renewed. Shine!