

Renewing our promises: A Watch Night message from Bishop Lanette Plambeck

Please join with me in a spirit of prayer.

“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 by 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.”

“We are that threshold where we say goodbye to 2023, and hello to 2024. At the beginning of the new year, congregations of the Wesleyan tradition, churches throughout the United Methodist family, renew their covenant with God using the traditional Covenant Service. You will find it in *The United Methodist Book of Worship*. A piece of this important part of our tradition is the Wesleyan Covenant Prayer.”

“John Wesley adapted this prayer from the Puritan tradition that was so important to his parents, Samuel and Suzannah, and life in the Epworth rectory. It informed his theology and his preaching. He expected the people called "Methodists" to pray this prayer at the beginning of each new year as a way of remembering and renewing their baptismal covenant.”

“The prayer describes the life of a participant with Christ in Christ’s mission. It is a practical description of what Jesus was talking about when he said, “If any wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Baptism marks the beginning of life in Christ and his *ecclesia*,— the church, a people who "profess to pursue holiness of heart and life; universal love filling the heart and governing the life." The Covenant prayer helps us remember what this Jesus-way of life looks like and what loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving our neighbor as God loves us, is required of us.”

“When we pray this prayer, we remember that we are baptized. We renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of our sin. We accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We confess Jesus Christ as our Savior, trust wholeheartedly in his grace, and promise to serve Christ as Lord, in union with the church.”

“We renew our promise to live as faithful members of Christ’s church and serve as his representatives in this world. The Covenant Prayer describes missional life devoted to following Jesus and serving as Christ’s representative in the world.”

(from UMC Discipleship Ministries, Steve Manskar, author, 2018
<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/blog/the-wesley-covenant-prayer-and-the-baptismal-covenant>)

Representatives he loves and representatives he is working to redeem.

It is a covenant that tells that being a Christian is more a way of life than a system of beliefs. The Covenant Prayer describes the Jesus way of self-giving and self-emptying love. This way of living and loving is possible only in a community centered in the life and mission of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Wesley and the early Methodists annually prayed the Covenant.

As we think about how we enter into 2024, I would lean us towards the tradition and teaching of Bishop Rueben Job. What does it mean for us in the practice of ministry, in the way that we are in relationship with one another, in our ministries inside the walls of the church and our expression of ministry outside the walls of the church? What does it mean for us to live in the ethos of doing no harm, of doing intentional good, and attending to the ordinances of God?

Making sure that what we do and why we do it, testifies to the way that we love God and the way that God loves us. What does it look like for us to set that foundation as we seek to reach new people? As we seek to heal a broken world? As we seek to accept all and make a place for the church for all, what does it mean for us to say, these are the things we hold in common? To live and love as this expression of God's grace in The United Methodist Church.

Friends, I welcome you into this new year. I don't think we need to approach it with a bunch of New Year's resolutions, that we might lose sight of in the next twenty-four hours. But I do invite you to approach it in the posture of Christ. Christ who has transformed your lives. Christ who guides us and leads us as the Church. Christ who calls us to be a vessel of good news in this world.

My friends, may this new year be the best year yet for you and for The United Methodist Church. As together we seek to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and strength, to be a people of the Great Commandment. As together we seek and commit being a people of the Great Commission, going into all places sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. As we walk in the posture of the Great Requirement in Micah, to seek justice, love mercy, and to do so in a posture of humility, always alongside the movement of God.

*Content quoted and adapted from UMC Discipleship Ministries, Steve Manksar, author.