

RENEWING THE COVENANT  
Rev. Jon Freshwater, at Brewster Baptist Church  
December 31, 2006

New Year's resolutions have been a part of my life since childhood. I can remember as a young lad growing up in Ohio, our family was very serious about new year's resolves to do something different, or to be better at something in the new year. Some of my personal resolutions actually went beyond the usual trivial promises. It might have been a resolve to be more helpful to my invalid Mother; be more prompt in my newspaper route; improving my grades at school...you get the picture. Unfortunately, for most of us, our resolutions remain at the level of the trivia...having to do more with personal habits and calories than matters of faith.

As a pastor, planning worship services on New Year's Eve, I often turned to the tradition of the New Year's COVENANT SERVICE. One of the themes of that New Year's service is the pledge to live NOT for ourselves and our own comfort, but for God and for others.

When Doug asked me to preach on this particular Sunday, my first response was, "Do I have to follow the plan of preaching each Sunday on one of the books of the Bible? And, if so," I asked, "what book comes up on this last Sunday, indeed the last DAY, of the year?" Doug smiled and replied, "Yes, you would be fitting in to the order of the books of the Bible, and on that particular Sunday it is DANIEL." Great, I thought; in my 36 years of active ministry, I had referred to the familiar stories from the book of Daniel, but NEVER had I preached a sermon on the book of Daniel. We know the stories of Daniel's companions being thrown into the fiery furnace and, of course, the main character Daniel's experience in the lions' den. But beyond that I would guess that most of us are not well informed on what the book of Daniel is all about.

It is commonly accepted among Biblical scholars that Daniel is not the sole author of the book of Daniel. In fact, there is more than a little controversy over just WHO Daniel was. The theories range from those who proclaim that there was NOT an actual person named Daniel who lived in history....to those who theorize that the narratives in this book were APPLIED to a man named Daniel (the narratives not being actual events).....to still others who insist that each event as recorded in the Book of Daniel actually took place in the life and time of a prophet, Daniel, who came to a position power in his occupied land.

But we cannot get hung up on Biblical scholarship or controversy. In doing so we could miss the religious truth of this book. Marcus Borg, author and student of the Bible, reminds us that we can be inspired by the truths of the Scriptures, even if they come to us in a setting which may or may not be factual, or historical. I don't find it too much of a stretch to conclude that the main character in the book of Daniel and his colleagues are at a decision making stage in life not too dissimilar to the making of some really serious New Year's resolutions. Note that I said REALLY SERIOUS resolutions. Daniel has to review where he and his colleagues have been, what is happening in their individual and collective lives, and what choice or choices they can/must make. Although the book of Daniel is not meant to be history, it is helpful to know the historical setting in which the author is writing. Daniel's message was shared with the Jewish population at one of the times of foreign occupation of their land. The current foreign ruler, Antiochus, had successfully pressured many of the faithful among the Israelites to turn AWAY from their religious traditions. Many, including Daniel, were taken to the beautiful city of Babylon. A goodly number of them began worshipping the pagan Gods of the occupiers of the land. Altars to these foreign Gods were

established. It was the safe and prudent thing to do if these young Jewish believers were to survive, physically, and if they were to live comfortably under foreign rule. Many Jews submitted to this pressure; others who refused to do so often went to their deaths.

It is recorded in one of the apocryphal books of the time that those willing to turn away from their God had begun working on their colleagues, saying "Let us make a treaty with the heathen round about us, for since we became separated from them, many misfortunes have befallen us." The king made the appeal that they all should become one as ancient customs were abandoned and more altars to the foreign Gods were established.

The issue had become one of ASSIMILATION vs. DEFENDERS OF THE FAITH. It was easier and certainly safer to assimilate to the culture, follow the crowd if you will, than to make any sacrifices for the faith. It involved choices which offered not only safety, but pleasure and power; security and assurance for their personal future. I hope this is beginning to sound familiar. Since the decade of the 80s our own culture has earned the title of the "me" generation. I read recently of a survey of new college students who were asked "What is the primary goal of your years in college?" In 1970 the students taking that survey revealed that most of them had as their primary goal, the establishing of a philosophy of life, a purpose for life and work. But in the most recent study, 2005, it came as no surprise that the primary goal of the that group of students was to "enable them to become financially secure."

I would suggest that this attitude points out the parallel between today's choices and the choices of those who heard the message of the book of Daniel. Even the name "DANIEL" is an indication of where the Jewish community was in the second century B.C. and where we are today. The name DANIEL means "God has given decision." Although we are not living under the oppression of foreign rulers, are we not under the same pressure to assimilate to a culture which puts "self" and SELF PRESERVATION first?

And as we set individual power and success as our primary goal, are we not lifting pagan Gods of the culture around us as our object of adoration...if not worship? Look at the declining membership of most of the major denominations of the Christian faith. Religion, or witnessing to one's faith just isn't terribly important to an increasing number of people in our culture....indeed around the world. There isn't much room for belief in God when the primary goal and purpose of our life has become advancement of one's self.

One of the professors at Boston U. School of Theology which Pastor Doug and I both attended, was Dr. Harold DeWolf. Since my time at the school was more than a few before Doug was there, I am not sure that he studied under Dr. DeWolf. But I am confident that Doug would have liked this popular professor. He once shared a story of a visit to the seminary by a certain Methodist bishop's assistant, called District Superintendent. The purpose of the visit was to recruit students willing to come to his district to serve. The superintendent was invited to speak at the Chapel prior to meeting with students. His sermon included some of his beliefs about the person of Christ. Again and again he insisted that Jesus was God, and must be acknowledged as the all-wise, omnipotent God himself. After the service in the chapel and in support of his invitation to meet with individual students and accept appointments in his district, he expressed confidence that in HIS district a young minister could start with a higher salary, in more pleasant surroundings, and with prospects of more rapid advancement than anywhere else in the country. When the visitor later complained that NOT ONE student came by to see him, Dr. DeWolf said that if he could have heard some student conversations after chapel, he would have understood the reason. One student asked, "What did you think of his Christology?" Another replied:

“Which one?... The one preached in the chapel or the one implied in the invitation to his district?”

Last week was the announcement of TIME MAGAZINE’S person of the year. On that day, my wife, Joyce, asked if I had heard the announcement of who that person was. “No,” I responded. Who is Time’s person of the year?” I was standing near a mirror, and she said, “Look in the mirror.” “What am I looking at?” I inquired. “You are looking at the person of the year....YOU!!” I looked in the mirror and said to myself, “Jon, you have had some stellar years in your ministry, but your activities this year 2006, several years into retirement, does not qualify YOU as Time Magazine’s PERSON OF THE YEAR.” I was to learn soon that the Magazine named each of us....you....you... and you as PERSON OF THE YEAR, primarily because of the power and position of the individual in the field of communication and media. TV News anchor, Brian Williams, writing in that last issue of TIME, rationalizes this choice (and I quote) that “Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is...THEM, and our culture is now built upon that idea.”

Hear, again, words of our text from the book of Daniel: “He (referring to the wicked KING) shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant; but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.”

This warning of inflated importance continues into the New Testament. Much of Paul’s letter to Timothy cautions us regarding this temptation. Listen to the warning given to Timothy (Chapter 3) “There will be perilous times when men will love nothing but self and money; they will be arrogant, boastful...intemperate and fierce, strangers to all goodness...and swollen with self-importance.”

My friends, when God covenanted with his people through Moses and on throughout the history of the people of Israel, he expected more from his followers than self-centered reactions to his love and his presence in our lives.

Daniel and his colleagues had every opportunity to put themselves and their self-preservation FIRST. All they needed to do was succumb to the pressures of those around them. The promise given them was comfort, security, and power. But Daniel was a sincere man of faith who could not...and would not...compromise his beliefs and traditions. He knew that God had made a covenant with his ancestors. And regardless how many times God’s people failed to live up to their part of that covenant, God kept renewing God’s promises to the people. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us that God never gives up on us. From Jeremiah 31:31-34 we find these words of new promise:

“The time is coming, says the Lord, when I will make a NEW COVENANT with Israel and Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although they broke my covenant, I was patient with them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with Israel after those days; I will set my law within them and write it on their hearts; I will become their God and they shall become my people...I will forgive their wrongdoing and remember their sin no more.”

That is the NEW COVENANT God made with God’s people. It is the promise that God has NEVER withdrawn, even to the point of giving us his son, the one whose birth we so recently celebrated. In Daniel’s time and in every age, the pressure is on for us to break our part of the covenant. Daniel knew that pressure and that temptation. He was determined

NOT TO take the easy way out, which would be to visit the altars to the pagan God, turning his back on his own religion.

My heart aches for the increasing thousands of persons... no millions... who continue to turn away from the faith of their fathers and mothers in search of what they think is a more comfortable, secure way of life. But it is happening. I am sure several of you saw the recent documentary on CNN, entitled "WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?" A leading pastor/professor of the American Baptist Church, Dr. Dwight Hopkins, was on the panel of this hour long program. What REALLY concerned me was the interview with the pastor of one of the largest and fastest growing churches in America, Pastor Joel Osteen from the Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas. He is one of those who preach what has been labeled the "PROSPERITY GOSPEL." He and his ilk preach that joining their fellowship is "The gateway to a world of wealth." And he means that, literally. Turn to Christ and worship with this congregation and you are promised well-paying jobs with good benefits. Osteen says during the interview that PROSPERITY IS GOD'S WISH FOR EVERYONE. No wonder he serves the fastest growing church in the country, right? Daniel encourages us to higher standards. If anything, he puts security and comfort lowest on the list of priorities, when it means denouncing the faith. He wants us to stand firm and renew our part of the HOLY covenant when facing pressure to turn our backs on our faith tradition and seek self-promotion and security. I remind you that the one whose birth we celebrated this week, in the end, walked forward to Calvary refusing to give in to renounce his God, or compromise his beliefs.

Will our New Year's Resolutions be kept this year? Will we keep in mind the Covenant we have with God? Or will they be resolutions related to weight gain and eating desserts? Daniel cautions his colleagues and us when he says:

"..Do NOT BE SEDUCED WITH FLATTERY AND VIOLATE THE COVENANT, BUT AS PEOPLE OF GOD STAND FIRM AND TAKE ACTION."

I would like to end these thoughts on Daniel with a responsive prayer for the New Year. Let us pray responsively:

Responsive Prayer

(One; **All**)

Creative God, you make all things new in heaven and on earth.

**We come to you in a new year with new desires and old fears, new decisions and old controversies, new dreams and old weakness.**

Because you are a God of hope,

**We know that you create all the possibilities of the future.**

Because you are a God of love,

**We know that you accept all the mistakes of the past.**

Because you are the God of our faith,

**We enter your gates with thanksgiving and praise; we come into your presence with gladness and a joyful noise to serve and praise you. Amen.**