

## “Living the Covenant Promise”

### **Text John1:1-18, preached at Bolton United on January 5, 2020, by the Reverend Eleanor Scarlett.**

Background about John Wesley’s Covenant Service:

One of John Wesley’s legacies was for Methodists to renew their covenant with God especially on the first Sunday of the New Year. He encouraged members to recite the words of the covenant. This practice of covenanting continues today in a variety of modified forms of modifications including being more inclusive. This service has been an important and fruitful source of blessing to Methodism since 1755 and has since been adopted by some member churches of the reform tradition.

Some of you might be wondering why I am mentioning Methodists especially at a time when Methodists of the US are in a theological debate around issues of faith. John Wesley’s Manifesto of the mid 1800’s reminds us to promote tolerance and to share God’s love with everyone. \*

Let us take some time, to give God thanks and to offer our gratitude for bringing us to this day. On this first Sunday in the New Year as we reflect back, let us remember those who began the year 2019 but are no longer with us. Let us give thanks for their lives and for the lessons they taught us. Our God has brought us to this day and for this we are eternally grateful. We are here to reflect and to remember what we are called to do.

The question I now ask is, “How do we live out God’s Covenant Promise?” When we talk about a Covenant Service, we often think in terms of Covenanting with a new ministry. Today though we are talking about renewing our Covenant relationship with God. When we renew our Covenant, we are saying yes to God all over again. God calls us into Covenant relationships and with him and each other. God’s promise for us is that we live into the Light that was there from the beginning of time.

Jeremiah spoke of a Covenant that God would make with God’s people. “God said the Covenant I will make with the house of Israel will not be like those of old.” It is here we see God choosing Israel and we ask why. God was not compelled to choose Israel. He could have chosen any other people. Israel was no more remarkable than any other nation, quite the opposite. It was not the most powerful, or the most civilised, or the wealthiest. In choosing Israel, God chose a nation that was not a nation but a group of people who were once slaves in a foreign land.

God seems to act on the side of the oppressed, God acts through love which is free and undeserved, which is a state of grace. This new Covenant we are observing is made known in Jesus, rooted in God’s free, unexplained, unmerited grace. Jesus chose the

poor, the lame, those rejected by society, those whom no one else would have chosen. This is exactly where we stand today. We have no choice in the matter! The God we serve chooses us, flaws and all.

Jesus is from the same tradition as Jeremiah. He did not make the covenant with individuals but with 12, a number which symbolises the whole nation. The blood he shed was not for the few, but for the many, it was his way of saying that it was for all. We sometimes forget how wide God's love really is and claim it as ours alone. This is a Covenant for everyone – every religion, class, colour and nation. There are no restrictions, it is for all. Those of you who are here today are not getting any preferred treatment. God's love is already given, and we are ready to accept it as we stand in solidarity with all peoples.

In John chapter 1, we are reminded that God through Jesus Christ has been with us since the beginning of time. There was a man sent by God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to that light, so that through him all might believe. John was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. God sent Jesus into the world to show us that all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. Verse 14 of the text reminds us that "God's Word became flesh and lived amongst us, and we have seen this glory, the glory of God's only son full of grace and truth."

We are here this morning to participate in the Sacrament of Communion. I would like for us to imagine standing beside some of society's outcast: the homeless, the hungry, the refugees. Think about it, standing beside people we have never met before, think of the smell, their facial expressions, some are dirty and unkept, what feelings emerge for us? How do you react? Do we begin a conversation, if so, what is the first thing we say? How do we see these people, how does God see them? Ponder these questions.

In God we are all one. How then do we live as Covenant people? We do, when we embrace an attitude of forgiveness, remembering that God calls us to walk in the light of love? True forgiveness is never easy, yet this is what we are called to live into. Those of us who have suffered rejection or betrayal by someone we have loved will understand that the only way these relationships can begin again is to forgive in order to free ourselves and the other from the past and make a fresh start. To forgive is costly, it means letting go of ourselves and of everything for the gift of forgiveness. It calls us to see forgiveness as an act of gratitude that comes in and through the One who is the Light.

As a church, we too struggle with forgiveness which prevents us from fully experiencing God's blessings for us. We want God's blessings, but we keep holding on to the hurts and do not let go. We are called to let go and let God in. God is calling us to stop

blocking our blessings, to stop closing the doors of our hearts, to open them and let her in. God is nudging us to seek the Light of Christ's promises. God wants us to experience the glory that comes with the Covenant Promise!

How do we experience God's Covenant? We experience it when we empty ourselves and recommit our lives anew to Christ, when we give space to become part of the body of Christ, when we change our attitudes, and give way to something new. This can be painful and yet it calls us to examine those places in our lives we would rather not go. When we renew our covenant it's spiritual. It's a call to transformation where God's love for us offers forgiveness.

To live this covenant is a call to an intimate relationship with God, and with God's people. It unites us with Christ, the church and with God's Spirit. Wesley's covenant calls us to a new life in Christ. This comes not by learning a thousand rules on how to live; but by walking closer with God, in and through the One who was with God from the beginning.

This is not something that happens once – it happens every day when we say yes to God's call in the simple, the mundane and in the extraordinary moments of our lives. Let's not hesitate, let's open ourselves to receive God's Covenantal Love for us, knowing that whenever we say yes to God we are allowing God's Spirit to transform us into something new.

Thanks be to God- Amen!

\*Source

NRV

### **John Wesley's Manifesto**

- 1.Reduce the gap between rich people and poor people
- 2.Help everyone to have a job
- 3.Help the poorest, including introducing a living wage
- 4.Offer the best possible education
- 5.Help everyone to feel they can make a difference
- 6.Promote tolerance
- 7.Promote equal treatment for women
- 8.Create a society based on values and not on profits and consumerism
9. End all forms of slavery
10. Avoid getting into wars
11. Share the love of God with everyone
12. Care for the environment