



VOW-MAKING - VOW-BREAKING
Luke 2:21-40, Philippians 3:12-16

In the fall of 1932 - a group from the freshman football team at Stanford University in California had just seen the varsity lose to the football team at USC for the fifth year in a row. This upset them greatly. Let me share a quote from this meeting:

On the Monday following the varsity's embarrassing loss to USC, quarterback Frank Alustiza gathered the rest of the freshman team around him. "They will never do that to us," Alustiza said. "We'll never lose to USC." "Let's make that a vow," shouted halfback "Bones" Hamilton. They did, and the vow was fulfilled by three consecutive wins over USC.¹ (Penn State might consider this for upcoming games with Michigan and Ohio State.)

They made a vow - they kept a vow. Remember the days when your word was your bond - and your bond was your word?

Many in this church family made resolutions on New Year's Day. New Year's Eve and New Year's Day are appropriate occasions to reflect on the past and the future - the vows we make and keep - and the vows we make - and break. They are very decisive in our journey of faith. A vow is simply our faith in action. It is our obedience to spiritual truth.

In all honesty - the ending of a year and beginning of a new year has different effects on all of us. Some approach it with great anticipation and enthusiasm. They make career decisions and vows that last them a lifetime. For others it passes with little difference. A kind of slow cynicism has taken over the human spirit.

You no longer thrive - but survive. For others there is a sober realization that a major reassessment needs to take place in our lives if we are to fulfill our identity in Christ. I always like the determined spirit and common sense of Winston Churchill. When asked by a historian what was the best year of his life he replied "**Next year.**" I like that. December 31, 2007, is the closer. However, January 1, 2008, is the opener. A new season of opportunities is before us. There is the possibility of a clean slate - a new day full of possibilities for life. Be careful what approach you choose and what vows you make.

There was a deacon in a small Baptist church who would always pray “**Lord, clean out the cobwebs of my life.**” Finally, one of the dear saints of the church family cried out “**Lord, forget the cobwebs - please go after the spider!**” Get the spider. The dear saint knew there was a difference between a fresh start - and staying in the same rut for the race of life.

This past year in my life and the life of this church there were happy moments - joyous times. However, there were tough times and decisions as well.

However, because of our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Master - we believe the year 2008 can be our best ever. If God’s grace has brought us safe thus far - His grace will be sufficient for this year as well. The vows which we commit ourselves to will either make us - or break us. The choice is up to us.

It is tough to keep vows when long days and nights of preparation and effort are required. However, when the moment of achievement and fulfillment is granted - it brings a joy that helps one forget the strain and effort required.

This brings me nicely to our scripture lesson from **Luke 2:21-40**. It is the heart-warming story of the holy family going to the holy city of Jerusalem to present the newborn babe at the Temple. He would be circumcised and named.

It is only Luke’s gospel that gives us this snapshot and portrait of the life of Jesus. Only Luke speaks to us what happens after the shepherds, angels, and heavenly hosts are gone. Mary and Joseph have a son to rear, religious obligations to keep, and eventually a trip back to Nazareth.² It is called Simeon’s Song or “The Nunc Dimitis”. We see from Joseph and Mary’s presentation of Jesus at the Temple - they make a **vow** to raise him in the faith of the Abrahamic covenant. Here we see the powerful forces of influence that the family and Temple had upon the life of the Christ child who grows up to be the Messiah of the human race. Jesus’ life was nurtured in the context of worship and obedience. Even in his infancy, Jesus’ life was characterized as being in full obedience to the laws of Moses. In our text for today, five items were cared for to fulfill these laws.³

We don’t know a great deal about the childhood years of Jesus - except that at the local synagogue and the trips to the Temple he was learning about the love of God - and the requirements of the law. At the weekly synagogue services Jesus would learn of the **vows** made by his parents for him - and claim those **vows** for himself in a deep and personal way. John Wesley, our founder, once said he learned more about God from his mother’s knee than from all the theologians of England. Vow-making is simply woven into the fabric of our lives.

The question is not whether you make vows - but what kind of vows you make. Do they enlarge you - or diminish you? Do they allow you to seek and climb and reach for the very best God has in store for human life? Or do they cause you to stumble and self-destruct? Are they for God’s glory or ours?

One of the insights that I learned from my studies this week - is that the same spirit of obedience and submission which propelled Mary forward in faith – also sustained Simeon in his journey of faith. Mary said, “Let it be to me according to your Word;” Simeon declares, “According to your Word,” or “As you have promised.”⁴ This is why in our lesson today Simeon can be content even as he faces death knowing that he has been faithful to the carrying out of the Lord’s call upon his life. The vows they made sustained them both.

Notice it was at the Temple and synagogue that all the characters in our lesson today learned how to work and how to worship. They learned to trust and place their lives in God’s will and truth alone. This is the same spirit and insight found in our covenant prayer in the Wesleyan tradition written by John Wesley.

The late priest Henri Nouwen wrote a book entitled **Sabbatical Journeys**. He tells of some insights for his spiritual life that he learned from two trapeze circus artists that he befriended. He learned of the deep trust and special relationship that exists between the ones who flies and the one who catches. The flyer is the one who lets go, and the catcher is one who catches. When the flyer is swinging high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he must let go. At that moment his job is to remain as still as possible and to wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him out of the air. The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. The flyer must wait in absolute trust.

The catcher will catch him. But he must wait. This is exactly what Simeon and Anna do. They are not disappointed.

It was this trust that empowered Jesus to live out all the vows he had learned and made for himself. This is what we learn here at the church house year in and year out. We learn to trust and obey as well – even though it is not a popular thing to do.

It was from the Puritan faith tradition that John Wesley learned of the importance of renewing one’s covenant or vow to the Lord on a yearly basis.

He held this special service every January 1st - beginning in 1755 – at his headquarters in London and at every visit he made to his Methodist Societies. Worshipers were given a copy of the service and they signed it as a reminder of their vows and covenant for the entire year.

We are participating in a shortened version of the service today to rededicate our lives and work to the glory of God. There are 3 spiritual principles a Covenant Service or Renewal Service reminds us of.

FIRST, WE MUST NEVER LOSE OUR FIRST LOVE OR FIRST PRIORITY, WHICH IS GOD.

This comes from **Revelation 2:1-7** and the reminder given to the church at Ephesus.

SECONDLY, WE MUST NEVER FORGET OUR IDENTITY AS SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE COVENANT.

If you don't have an identity – someone will surely give one to you. We are named and claimed for the kingdom of God. It was this identity that sustained Simeon and Anna for a faithful witness in a God-less culture and environment.

In **Luke 2:34** it shares “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.” This simply means – when it comes to Jesus Christ – there can be no neutrality. We either surrender to him or are at war with him. And it is the tragedy of life that our pride often keeps us from making that surrender – which leads to victory.⁵ Notice how Simeon and Anna step aside after a long life of witness and prayer and give first place to the ministry and mission of the small child.⁶

THIRDLY WE MUST NEVER FORGET OUR CALLING – OUR VOCATION – OUR ELECTION TO BUILD THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

We are called and commissioned to be part of God's team. We are servants of God to do his work and bidding. Notice how Simeon and Anna served faithfully all those years without fanfare.

You and I – by the grace and mercy of God's gift of Jesus Christ – are sons and daughters of the New Covenant. There is no greater identity and calling than that.

Our church family has been blessed by the work and witness of Clarence Nelson for 70 + years. On the day we honored him for his 73 years of Sunday School teaching, he shared how – at the tender age of 13 – he made a vow at a Christian Endeavor meeting. The vow was all of 2 or 3 sentences. However, he spent the 70+ years living out those vows. Here we see the positive power of vow-making for one's life and direction.

This brings me nicely to our Lord's Table and the bread and cup today. Here we see the evidence of the one who kept his vows to love God - even when it cost him his life. Here the example of vow-making and vow-keeping is seen at its best. Here we see vow-keeping that enhances life - and satisfies the deep longings of our human spirit. About 20 years later he goes to the same city - and to the same Temple - and because of the vows he learned as a youngster - he turns the tables over. He dies on a cross as the Lamb of God to take away the sins of the world. He is raised from the dead and all humankind is offered the gift to become a new creation in Christ.

May the bread and cup help you to press on towards the goal of living your life in the anticipation that the best year is yet to be. May it strengthen you to live out the vows you have made to the glory of God.

May the words of God's servant - the Apostle Paul - in **Philippians 3:12-14** be our closing words today: **"Not that I have already obtained all this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have take hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."**⁷

May God give us grace so to do – and be.

Let us go to the holy table.

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
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ENDNOTES

1. Thanks to Steve Zeisler, Pastor, Peninsula Bible Church for this story. He credits Gary Cavelli, Stanford Sports, Stanford Alumni Association. The web site for Stanford University has a photo of "The Vow Boys," if you PowerPoint your sermons.

² Fred B. Craddock, [et. al], **PREACHING THROUGH THE CHRISTIAN YEAR: YEAR B**, Trinity Press International, first edition, Valley Forge, PA, 1993, page 48.

³ Ibid, Craddock, page 48.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE: Conversations with its translator**, NavPress Publishing Group, Colorado Springs, CO 2007, page 1582.

⁵ William Barclay, **"The Daily Study Bible Series, THE GOSPEL OF LUKE,"** revised edition, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1975, page 27.

⁶ Ibid, Peterson, page 1582.

7. NIV., Philippians 3:12-14.